The Wings of Dreams

A Twelve Kingdoms novel

by

Fuyumi Ono

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Prologue

In the center of the world was the "Yellow Sea." An island, actually, surrounded to the north, east, south, and west by four inland seas known as the Black, Blue, Red, and White.

Early one morning, a tiny black dot appeared in the sky to the north above the Black Sea, the shadow of a kijuu pegasus taking flight from the western shores of the Kingdom of Kyou.

Bathed in the rays of a rising sun—now approaching the spring equinox—it cast off occasional flashes of silver as it streaked through the air straight toward the southwest. Beyond the melancholy shades of the briny deep, a great wall blocked the way before them, shimmered in the mist like a mirage.

The tops of the enormous wall traced a ragged line between the heavens and the waters. These were the mighty Kongou Mountains that encompassed the Yellow Sea.

Though the kijuu crossed the sea at speeds faster than any sailing vessel, only the gradually darkening hues of the cliffs of the Kongou Mountains provided any indication of the shrinking distance. And yet, as the steadily soaring peaks made clear, they were indeed drawing inexorably closer.

The kijuu flew all the faster. The sun reached its zenith above the fleeing shadow and turned toward the west. The Kongou Mountains filled the entire horizon.

The bottomless spires broke the surface of the sea like rows of jagged fangs, forming a near-vertical line of palisades that continued on and on, higher and higher, converging into an enormous mountain range that clawed at the sky.

A small sandbar came into view at the base of those cliffs. A speck of dirt compared to the Kongou Mountains. The kijuu drew a bead on that sandbar and slowly descended in a broad arc.

As the kijuu approached the spit, it became clear that far from being a mere sandbar, it was a broad table of land. Closer still and the coastline of this pitched land facing the Kongou Mountains came into view. Ships flying gray, weathered sails queued at the mouth of the harbor to the north.

The flying beast dropped in altitude, glided through the sky above the harbor, and headed straight for the Kongou Mountains.

The small shadow raced across the rice paddies, the thick foliage and treetops beginning to bud, skimmed above the forests that covered the mountains like a low-lying fog, swept through the skies above quiet villages and old crossroads.

Dropping lower with each landmark, the kijuu arrived at the foot of one of the minor ridges in the Kongou foothills, home to the most distant city in the realm. Completely enclosed within its barrier walls, the city spread out against the base of the peaks that comprised the Kongou Range.

A single road led to the gate, etched now with long shadows. Travelers on the road picked up the pace. Several turned their faces to the sky, stopped in their tracks, and stared at the winged creature alighting in their midst. Then scattered in all directions. The kijuu set down on the patch of bare ground.

“What the hell!”

“If you’re going to land a kijuu around here, do it in a field! Not the middle of the bloody road!”

A thirty-something man dismounted from the kijuu. Oblivious to the voices of protests erupting around him and ignoring the other travelers, he took in the signboard over the city gate.

“Ken County Seat,” it read. This “sandbar” projecting out from the Kongou Mountains was the administrative capital of Ken County in the Kingdom of Kyou.

After a glance at the signboard and a brief stretch, he took up the reins of the kijuu and entered Ken. Crossing the crowded main thoroughfare, he made his way to an inn in the northwest corner of the city.

“Welcome!”

A child picking up litter next to the gate brightly called out and hurried over to him

when he passed through the old stone gate of the inn. He peered at the boy's face and grinned. "Ah, you must be Shoumei."

"Yeah, but—?" the boy answered with understandable caution.

He leaned over. "I'm Gankyuu. Remember me? We had a lot of fun together last time."

"Uncle Gankyuu?"

"That's right. Do you remember me now?"

The boy chortled. "It's been a long, *long* time."

Gankyuu gave the boy's head an affectionate pat. They'd last seen each other two years before. The boy had been ten at the time, doing odd jobs around his father's family business. That hadn't included greeting guests.

Gankyuu handed him the reins. "So you've been promoted to guardsman, eh?" he joshed. "He's all yours, Mr. Guardsman, Take good care. Make sure nobody else gets too close."

"I know," the boy sniffed. He took the reins from Gankyuu, though he couldn't hide a touch of timidity as he looked up at the formidable face of the kijuu.

"Is he the same kijuu as before?"

"Ah, my last kijuu was killed by a youma."

The boy turned his attention back to Gankyuu. "By a youma? Are you okay?"

"More or less, as you can see for yourself. How's Ken doing? No youma about, I take it?"

"There are," he said bluntly, already resigned at his young age to the impending state of affairs. "They show up now and then."

Twenty-seven years had passed since the death of the empress. The kingdom was gathering speed in its downhill course. Ken was well prepared for the inevitable youma onslaught. But youma showing up even *here* meant they must be thick on the ground elsewhere.

The boy caught his breath like he'd just remembered something. Regripping the reins he said, "What kind is it?"

The kijuu resembling a horse, except for its sharp, intimidating horn and thick claws instead of hoofs. Gankyuu pressed a coin into the boy's hand and removed the travel bags strapped to the kijuu's back. "It's a haku."

He gave the kijuu a slap on the flanks and the boy a tap on the head and crossed the covered courtyard. As soon as entered the inn, he addressed himself to the back of the man standing there.

"Got a room?"

The man's head was slumped forward as if examining his feet. His head snapped around and he smiled, the movement revealing the unkempt little girl in front of him. Gankyuu thought at first he'd be whiling away the time with her, but it looked like he

and the girl were engaged in some sort of business.

The man crossed the room with long strides. “I do believe it’s Gankyuu! Long time, no see.”

“It can’t have been that long. What about that room?”

“Oh, sure.”

The innkeeper smiled broadly as he took Gankyuu’s bags. For some reason, he was more pleased than usual to accommodate this request.

“Hey, nothing fancy, remember. All I need is a place where I can get a good night’s sleep.”

“Understood, understood. I’ve got the last one here.”

“Nick of time.” That’s what life in Ken was like when the spring equinox fell the very next day. “I left my kijuu in the stables. I trust it’ll be well taken care of.”

The innkeeper nodded. “No problem—”

A shrill, demanding voice cut him off. “You wait just one minute!” The little ragamuffin of a girl—the child the innkeeper had been previously tending to—glared at him. “I asked for that room first! By what right are you giving to him?”

Gankyuu gazed down at the girl with a small jolt of surprise. The innkeeper groaned and held his head in his hands. “Miss, it was a bad joke to start with. You’ve pushed it too far. Go back to your mother. What inn is she staying at? I’ll send for her.”

“This is no joke. This is an inn, is it not? I want a room.” Her pale cheeks flushed red with anger.

An interesting turn of events, Gankyuu thought, taking the innkeeper by the arm and depositing the money in his palm. No way was his losing the last vacancy in town at this juncture. “Put my things away, would you? I’m off for a bit to eat.”

“I said, wait!” The girl scowled at Gankyuu. Not only scowled, but marched right over to him and looked him up and down. “You have no shame, cutting to the head of the line like that?”

She looked no older than the boy at the gate. Gankyuu said with a slight smile, “All in a day’s work for me. When you think about a girl staying by herself at an inn, I’ll save the shame for you.”

“This is no laughing matter. Whether child or adult, a guest is a guest.”

“Well, then, find yourself an inn that will treat you as such.”

“I would if I could!”

Gankyuu laughed out loud. The inns of Ken around the spring equinox would be packed in any case. No surprise that “No Vacancy” signs were already going up. Gankyuu wasn’t about to risk giving up the sure bet he already had in hand.

“There are bound to be more hospitable lodgings in one of the towns back the way you came.”

“Do you think any of the gates would still be open if I left now? Are you suggesting that I sleep under the stars at this time of year? You are right. I am a child, but that child needs a room too. Why don’t you try camping out at the side of road? I haven’t got your constitution. I would freeze to death. Haven’t you the humanity to spare me such a fate?”

“No, actually.”

“I see. You are deficient both in compassion and the good sense your mother must have taught you to take your turn in order.”

“So it would appear.”

The girl scowled at him. She placed one hand on her hip and shook her finger at him in the manner of a parent lecturing an unreasonable child. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“What am I—?”

Ken was the furthest city in the realm, well off the beaten path and deep in uncharted wilderness. Beyond Ken there was nothing but the Yellow Sea. It was by no means a vacation destination. Nor did anybody pass through along the way to more habitable climes. Besides the occasional adventure seeker, the only travelers who had business in Ken around the spring equinox were taking that business to the Yellow Sea.

“I should be asking you the same thing. What is a little girl like you doing wandering around a city like this? Did you take the wrong turn? What about your parents?”

“I am neither wandering about nor did I take any wrong turns. This is Ken. As for my parents, they are in Renshou.”

Gankyuu’s eyes opened a notch wider. Watching this little drama unfold in front of him, the flustered innkeeper raised his voice in equal surprise. “Your family lives in Renshou?”

“That’s right. I came all the way from Renshou. After many days, my life at risk on more than one occasion, I have finally arrived in Ken. And then to have the only lodgings torn out of my grasp—is that not more than a little cruel?”

“Nonsense. There’s no way you could have made it here all by yourself. Who brought you?”

“Nobody,” the girl answered crisply.

Gankyuu couldn’t believe his ears. Renshou was the capital of the Kingdom of Kyou. Getting there by ship and on foot took nearly two months, and considering the stride of a child, much longer for her.

“You’re telling me you came here, from Renshou, by yourself?”

“Yes. Are you impressed enough now to give me a room?”

Gankyuu was impressed. Without an adult to protect her and show her the way,

the girl had crossed a distance that made Gankyuu weary simply to think about.

"How did you go about ending up *here*?"

The girl lifted her gaze, the scorn plain in her eyes. "It goes without saying, doesn't it? One simply chooses whatever town is closest along the way when one needs to stop."

"It goes without saying, she says."

"Of course, I am going to Mt. Hou."

The mouths of Gankyuu and the innkeeper fell open.

"I am going on the Shouzan. Kyouki is on Mt. Hou."

"Hold on, there, Missy." *She's going on the Shouzan?* "You?"

"Does any law say that a child cannot?"

Not law that Gankyuu had ever heard of. "That is entirely beside the point! You are talking nonsense!"

"Why? If any of the adults of this kingdom were worthy vessels, one of them would be surely sitting on the throne already. That's why I am going." The girl looked at Gankyuu with all the more disdain. "I can only imagine that you are in Ken with the intention of proceeding on to the Yellow Sea as well. I should hardly need to point out that the kind of man who would steal the last room in the inn from a poor girl is only wasting his time going to Mt. Hou."

"Do you have any idea what the Yellow Sea is really like?"

"Who doesn't?" The girl answered Gankyuu like he'd asked her the sum of one and one. "No hamlets, no crossroads, no villages either. No inns, taverns or roads."

"Not only that."

"The place is thick with youma. I know. But youma can show up anywhere."

"There's no comparison. How do you intend to travel? What's a child to do when she's attacked by a youma?"

"And what are *you* going to do? What kind of odds do you give yourself against a youma?"

"I—"

"Even so, there's no point in *you* going. You're wasting your time. So you might as well give the room to me."

Now Gankyuu was the one holding his head in his hands. He squatted down in front of her. "Listen, Miss—"

"There is a person standing right here who might very soon become the next empress. Say whatever you are going to say with that in mind and I will listen."

"The Yellow Sea is hardly such a forgiving place."

The girl stared back at him, showing not the slightest sign of being swayed in the least.

"I am not going to Mt. Hou. I am entering the Yellow Sea in order to hunt youjuu

that can be trained as kijuu. Do you know what people call men like us?"

"Well—ah—"

"*Corpse hunters.* Even when old hands band together, they are less likely to capture a youjuu than they are to return from the Yellow Sea bearing the dead bodies of their companions on their backs. That's the kind of business this is."

The year before last during the fall equinox, Gankyuu lost his kijuu and hunting companions in the Yellow Sea. A youma devoured the six kijuu hitched to an outcropping of rock, along with his two partners nearby. Eight in total. If the beast hadn't already gorged itself, Gankyuu would have been the next item on the menu.

He stayed in the Yellow Sea until the winter solstice, managing to catch the haku to use as a kijuu. Training the beast kept Gankyuu busy enough that he hadn't made it back to Ken the year before.

"As a result, my supplies have hit rock bottom. On the way to Ken this year, I didn't stay at a single inn or sail on a single ship. No sooner had I finished training the haku but I rode him three days and two nights straight here, practically falling asleep in the saddle. I'm just as tired as you and probably more broke. Fact is, the keeper's a old family friend, so I'm counting on him to spot me the balance."

"Ah," the girl muttered, momentarily lost in her thoughts.

Gankyuu gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder. "That's the kind of place the Yellow Sea is. Now be a good girl and go back to your family. Your lodgings tonight—"

He didn't finish the rest of the sentence. The girl whipped off her dirty padded kimono, removed the fur coat beneath it and turned it inside out. Seeing the silver coins sewn in a crisscross fashion into the lining, Gankyuu nearly fell over in surprise. A single silver coin was worth five ryou, what the typical petty bureaucrat made in a month. And there was more than one silver coin.

She thrust the coat into Gankyuu arms. "Thirteen silver coins comes to sixty-five ryou. Take me to Mt. Hou."

The flabbergasted Gankyuu stared down at her.

"Consider it your retainer. However, you'll be expected to cover any expenses along the way." The girl smiled sweetly. "My name is Shushou. First item on the agenda: as your employer, I shall be taking the bed tonight. You can sleep on the floor. Do you have a problem with that?"

Part One

Chapter 1

[1-1] **T**he winds came on like the eternal nothingness of the pitch-black Sea of Emptiness itself.

Starting in the fall, the slow, cool, atmospheric currents began to stagnate, collecting into a mass of frigid air over the Northern Kyokai. The waters shed their warmth. The temperate zones thinned and contracted. Eventually the ocean took on a uniform chill.

Carried to the surface by the sluggish currents and touched by the winter frost, the dark water froze in patches, mottling the dark ocean with specks of white.

The air froze as well into an icy wind that poured out of the north, bobbing the ice floes, raising whitecaps on the surface, and finally surging to a gale-force wind that even turned back the tides as it bore down on the land.

This was the *joufuu.*

The joufuu roared out of the Kyokai from the northeast and whipped across the coasts. Reaching the northeast quarters of the Kingdom of Ryuu, it battered the mountains, released great quantities of snow, froze Ryuu to its very bones, and rushed on.

Leaving the last of its precipitation in the border mountain ranges, the now dry air flooded across the northern frontiers into the Kingdom of Kyou.

In Renshou, the capital of Kyou, the literally skyscraping heights of Ryou'un Mountain stood like great sailing masts. The cluster of overlapping peaks drew an arc around the city far below, as if embracing it within a bundle of calligraphy brushes. The peaks converged into a smaller number of summits that broke through the Sea of Clouds, forming an atoll of small islands at the top of the world.

The dry winter wind whistled among the peaks and hummed across the ridges, soaking like rain into the cracks and fissures, raising a constant, humming chorus. The winters in Renshou were accompanied by what sounded very much like the distant call of the ocean.

Where the sunlight slanted into the streets, the constantly blowing wind and the gusts tumbling down the bare face of the mountains whipped up little whirlwinds, one of which tossed the hems of a young girl's kimono.

"Oh, bother." The girl clutched her bag against her side while slapping down the dancing hems. "It's cold," she muttered.

Behind her a voice called out. "Hey, Shushou, you going home or what?"

She glanced over her shoulder as a boy emerged from deserted courtyard of the prefectural academy.

"Of course I am." Leaning against one of the gate's pillar, Shushou pointedly

averted her gaze.

"Yeah, but you've been standing there forever."

"And you've been watching me the whole time?"

The boy blushed a bit and glared at her in turn. "Doesn't meant I've been *watching* you the whole time. I happened to catch sight of you now and then. Like I would look at you even if you asked!"

"And I would be the last person on earth to ask *you.* Thank goodness."

The boy scowled at Shushou's prim profile, turned on his heels, and started up the stone steps in front of the gate. He whirled around and said, "Are you coming or not?"

"I am. You are, aren't you? Then why don't you hurry it up?"

"Same goes for you. If you're going home anyway, why don't *you* hurry it up?"

Shushou answered with a small sigh. "My bodyguards haven't arrived. I don't know where they're off wasting time, but I cannot very well leave without them. So I am going to wait."

"Ha!" exclaimed the boy. "You're scared of going home alone."

"What have I got to be afraid of? It's a straight walk from here."

"Tell the truth. A little princess like Shushou is scared to go anywhere without somebody accompanying her."

Shushou set her mouth and glared at the jesting boy. "You are correct. I was brought up to be a proper young lady. A proper young lady like me should not be seen walking around without an attendant. Were I to do so, *I* would not be the one taken to task, but my attendants."

"Still doesn't mean you're not a fraidy cat. Send them home ahead of you, then."

"You aren't listening to a single thing I'm saying."

Just then three burly men came running up the road, the bodyguards employed by Shushou's father. Slouched against the pillar, the impatiently waiting Shushou straightened and said, her voice rising slightly, "What happened? Is that blood?"

The bodyguards exchanged glances. Their leather armor was spattered with tiny red splotches.

"Please excuse the delay. We heard a scream from over there."

He pointed down the main thoroughfare that ran straight south from the main gate. Approaching dusk, the wide boulevard was thronged with the usual crowds. But among them were apprehensive faces, and where the bodyguard was pointing, people in a great hurry.

"What happened?"

"A *mushi* swarm. We took care of 'em. Sorry for making you wait."

Shushou furrowed her brows. Twenty-seven years had passed since the demise of the empress. Even here in Renshou, the capital city, youma outbreaks were becoming more and more frequent. As youma went, "mushi" referred to a variety of small and

relatively benign creatures. But they were also a harbinger of worse things to come. When a swarm of mushi appeared, much bigger youma often followed soon after.

"We'd better hurry," the bodyguard urged.

Shushou nodded, and stepped quickly down the stone staircase, the boy bringing up the rear.

"Hey, Shushou, do you think it'd be okay?"

"What?"

"To come with you?"

Shushou cast a peeved look over her shoulder. "What good would that do? As soon as we got home, the bodyguards would have to turn right around and head back out with you."

"But—" The boy hesitated then smiled. "This is the last time, after all. So I might as well keep watching out for you until we're all done here."

"Hardly necessary," Shushou muttered. "Besides, isn't it about time you headed home too? Well, then—"

Her words trailed off as Shushou skipped down the stone steps of the main gate. The boy watched her leave, his sigh swept away by the swirling wind.

Chapter 2

[1-2] **S**hushou's house was located in the northern outskirts of Renshou, a stone's throw from the prefectural academy.

Renshou sat at the foot of Mt. Ryou'un, facing north along its rising slopes. Ascending the angled streets to a quiet neighborhood lined with monasteries and shrines, then following the city walls surrounding the city higher until obstructed by the northern barrier wall, a magnificent, multistoried gate came into view.

The gate was two stories tall, the buildings to the left and right three. Further inside, the expansive roofs of the main wing of the house became visible, the tiles finished in bright green enamel. Multicolored ornamentation decorated the ridges of the roofs and hung from the eaves.

The loop road was slightly wider in front of the main gate. A large privacy wall stood in front of the gate, carved with bas-relief symbols petitioning for divine protection. Finely engraved tracery windows were set into the fence on either side of the wall, through which the branches of a stately arbor could be seen.

There was probably not a finer manor house in all of Renshou. The house was owned by a man named Sou. Because of the renown gardens covering the hillside, the estate came to be known as Sou Park or Sou Gardens.

Shushou was born there. Her formal given name was Sai. Her father's name was Sou Joshou, though he also went by "Sou Banko," a name that meant there wasn't a business he would not engage in.

Starting out in the forestry business common throughout Kyou, he pulled himself up by his bootstraps to earn a reputation as a merchant of considerable means in Renshou.

It was said in Renshou that one could only hope in vain to exceed the riches and honors of Banko. Because greater riches and honors simply did not exist. That did not extend only to his material blessings. Hajou, his wife, was known for her wisdom. He had three sons and three daughters who each possessed a strength of character to match their brilliant business sense.

And a much younger daughter.

Joshou ran as tight a ship inside the home as outside it. The large staff of servants revered him. So with good reason was it was that one could only hope in vain to exceed the wealth and honor of Joshou.

All the windows and openings in the gate towers, the physical symbols of that wealth, were covered with delicately-shaped iron latticework. Passing through the gate Shushou shook her head and murmured to herself, "Bloody fools."

They could build the strongest buildings in the world, surround themselves with the most devoted bodyguards, and the breath of one *hippou*—a winged, fire-breathing youma—would reduce the place to cinders. When it came to droughts and floods, cold waves and typhoons, all of Banko's wealth couldn't begin to combat the damage wreaked by youma and natural disasters.

"Hoh, I can't let myself be called a fool without comment."

Shushou raised her head to the unexpected interjection. Seeing the figure standing there in the courtyard, her bodyguards all kowtowed at once. Everyone in Renshou knew the face of this genial, middle-age man: Joshou.

"My youngest daughter needs to watch her tongue."

"Do I?"

Joshou smiled and gave her a hug. "Word came that there was a mushi outbreak near the prefectural academy. I was about to hurry to meet you, and here I run into Shushou cursing to high heavens."

Shushou acquiesced with a meek shrug, making Joshou smile again. He turned to the bodyguards and thanked them for their efforts. "It looks like you dealt with those mushi. Good work."

The bodyguards bowed their heads to the cool ground of the courtyard.

“That settles it, Shushou. I’m pulling you out of the academy. It’s not only your well being that I’m concerned about, but that of your bodyguards as well.”

“You don’t need to worry about it. The academy closed on its own.”

Shushou strode to the inner gate. Waiting for her bodyguards had chilled her thoroughly. The walk from the academy to her house had done little to warm her up.

“Closed?”

“Yeah. The headmaster died.”

There was one prefectural academy—also known as a *shougaku*—in each prefecture. The district academies, or *joushou,* matriculated the best students from the various shougaku who had received a recommendation from their headmaster. Shushou had been about to receive that recommendation.

She hadn’t *had* to attend the shougaku. Her father urged her to quite after finishing preparatory school (*jogaku*). She’d pitched a royal fit, only to see it all come to naught.

Joshou’s eyes widened in surprise. “Haku Sensei?”

“His house was attacked this morning by youma. They say a *bafuku* ate him.”

“Shushou—” Joshou ran over and knelt down next to her. “This is terrible news!”

“You don’t have to make a big deal over it. This is the second headmaster in a row. When you include the students who’ve died and all their relations, it’s getting to be a pretty run-of-the-mill kind of thing.”

“Don’t talk like that, Shushou.”

“It’s the truth!” She shrugged. “But hardly all that surprising. The headmaster’s house didn’t have bars on the windows.”

Shushou looked across the courtyard. All the windows and doors facing the courtyard were protected by beautifully designed iron latticework. Additional layers of coat of fresh plaster were added to the walls on a daily basis. The doors were reinforced with iron rivets. Watchmen stood guard day and night.

“The father of a boy from a nearby town died. His father traveled a long distance taking orders and delivering barrels. At sundown he hadn’t returned. The concerned neighbors went looking for him, only to discover that the people wintering over in a hamlet three miles away were all dead. They found his head there.”

“Shushou—”

“But what can you do? The boy didn’t have any bodyguards at his house. In the fall, locusts destroyed the whole crop. If his father didn’t deliver the barrels, they would starve. Payment for an order was found in his mouth. When the youma attacked, he probably worried about dropping it while running away.”

Joshou patted his daughter’s back in a consoling manner. As if escaping that reassuring touch, Shushou set off to the main wing of the house. “I am fine. I’ve gotten used to it, don’t you know. People dying isn’t so frightening anymore. Grandmama

died when I was young. It seems foolish to be afraid of anything after that."

"Shushou, enough."

Joshou ran after her and hugged his arms around her shoulders. He all but carried her into the parlor and set her down in a chair. "These are hard times."

"That's what everybody says."

"I understand the pain you must see in the people and the world around you. But you mustn't allow thoughts of resignation to take hold of your mind."

"I am hardly resigning myself."

"Shushou—"

Shushou looked up at her father. "Aren't you going on the Shouzan?"

Joshou's eyes opened a bit wider. "The Shouzan?"

"These are hard times because an emperor does not sit upon the throne. If you became the emperor, that would solve the problem, wouldn't it?"

Stroking his daughter's hair, Joshou shook his head and said with a sad smile, "Blessed though I may be, Shushou, I am nothing but an ordinary merchant."

Chapter 3

[1-3] **K**eika called from the living room. "Miss, supper is served."

Shushou put down her writing brush. She glanced over the sheets of seemingly random scribbling, gathered them up, and stuffed them into the bookcase. She was cleaning the ink stone when the door opened and Keika stuck her head into the room.

"Miss, is it true the headmaster was killed?"

"Um, yes."

"And yet you continue to study! School has been suspended, has it not?"

"True."

Keika was a live-in maid, a year older than Shushou. She was one of a class of servants that weren't paid a salary, but were reared as members of the family. In exchange for a minimal guarantee of room and board, they were granted a minimal but real standing. This wasn't to say that none of the servants in Shushou's house were paid a wage, but the gap in social status was considerable.

Keika was the child of such a live-in maid. Installed in the Sou estate by her parents, she'd been working there as a maidservant since she was little. Despite her status, having been raised together from a young age made her presence a relaxed and

familiar one, and being so close in age to Shushou, all the more so.

"Such turns of events are becoming commonplace to an unsettling degree. But we cannot allow ourselves to mope."

"I'm not moping about anything."

"That may be so, but you said you wished to take your dinner in your room."

"I don't particularly want to look at my father's face right now."

"Ah," Keika said with a dubious expression. She hauled Shushou to her feet and marched her into the living room. The evening meal was already set out on the dining table.

"Your father has been delighted with your progress. And to think he once mightily objected to your going onto the prefectural academy."

Shushou sat down and surveyed the table settings. "That he did."

"Does it really matter all that much? You can study here at home, can't you? Your father can always hire a tutor."

Shushou went to pick up her chopsticks and sighed instead. "The tutors my father hires teach nothing but etiquette and business. Besides, without a recommendation to the district academy, the whole matter is moot."

The prefectural academies prepared students for the district academies, which prepared students for the provincial colleges. College graduates were pretty much guaranteed a position in the civil service. In short, her merchant father could never quite grasp that Shushou wished to try for a career in government.

"It's so frustrating! I was *that* close to becoming a district scholar," as students who'd received a recommendation to a district academy were known.

"But you've come so far already! Not only your father, but even your brothers and sisters were perfectly satisfied with a preparatory school education."

"I don't think were so much *satisfied* as they didn't have the brains to earn a recommendation to the prefectural academy."

Keika gave Shushou a surprised look. "*That* again. Certainly you cannot begrudge the knowledge and skills that made this fine house possible. Why in the world would you want to become a civil servant?"

Shushou took a sip of tea and stared out the window. "Rise high enough in the government and you will never grow older."

"My, my. What a childish aspiration."

"What wrong with not wanting to die? To live forever and not turn out like your mom, all baggy and wrinkled."

"Don't be mean. Leave my mother out of this, if you please." Keika frowned, then peered at Shushou's face. "Are you going to eat?"

"I'm not in the mood. I lost my appetite."

"What are you going on about?" Keika picked up the chopsticks and thrust them

into Shushou's hand. "Such persnicketiness invites the wrath of the gods. Food is getting more expensive by the day. The average household cannot even afford the meager meal spread out before you."

Shushou looked at the array of dishes. "That's just silly," she said, putting the chopsticks down.

"Miss—"

"I have no illusions about how wealthy we are compared to everybody else. No ordinary family could afford something like this. But whether *I* eat or not is neither here nor there."

"You're just going to leave it there? There are so many who would love to partake of such a feast and cannot. And not only that, there are people who won't even be able to eat dinner tonight!"

"And?" Shushou looked up at Keika. "I know that. As my father likes to say, if you stay shut up inside the house and never venture outside, you'll never learn anything about the world. Going to school and meeting different people makes it painfully clear that other families aren't like ours."

"And so—"

"And so nothing. The one has no relationship to the other. Will eating this meal cause equal portions to rain down on those who go without? If the hungry are so pitiful, then take this food and give it to them."

"Pardon me for saying so, Miss, but even *this* is far more luxurious than what *I* will ever eat."

The kitchen workload had only increased of late. Keika and the rest of the live-in servants had seen cutbacks in their own meals. She was a growing girl, and the portions had never been generous to start with, so it was not unusual for her to wake up at night with an empty stomach these days.

She glared angrily at Shushou, who raised her cool countenance to Keika and said, "It's all yours, then."

"Miss!" Keika exclaimed in a shrill voice.

"Look," Shushou said, a chastening tint darkening her eyes. "The headmaster's house had no bars on the windows. He was attacked by a *bafuku* youma and devoured. A child fed himself for three days with the money he plucked from the mouth of his dead father, money earned delivering buckets. You sleep safely in your bed. You eat regularly and do not starve. I hope you appreciate how blessed *you* are."

Keika bridled. "What are you trying to say?"

"If you are going to feign ignorance of the obvious, then at least spare me the hackneyed moralizing. I don't want it. Take it away, all of it."

Now Keika's face paled. "Miss, what's gotten into you!"

No sooner had Keika's anger flared but Shushou grabbed the soup bowl, rose to

her feet, and threw it at her. “Shut up! I told you I didn’t want it!”

Keika stood there in stunned silence. The soup had cooled enough that it was no longer scalding. The greater shock was that the bowl had been hurled at her at all.

“W-what—did you do that for—?”

Tears welled up in misery and mortification. She bent over and wiped the broth from her cuffs and sleeves of her padded kimono. But it was already soaking into the fabric. The live-in servants did not receive a wage. They could count on room and board, but not clothing. Twice a year, the master gave them fresh fabric, but a growing girl like Keika soon outgrew her wardrobe.

On top of that, the manual labor done by the live-in servants day-in and day-out soon left their clothing threadbare. They patched the worn spots, sewed split seams back together, and made do. Once an article of clothing was beyond repair, it was either wait for somebody to take pity and part with a hand-me-down, or dip into the master’s New Year’s celebration allowance and have new clothing made.

“How awful—”

She just had the outfit made from fabric she’d received at New Year’s. Choking back sobs, she brushed off the minced vegetables and pieces of meat. Shushou grabbed her hand.

“I’m sorry!” Shushou fetched a hand towel and wiped down her dress. “I’m sorry, Keika. Is it hot?”

“Um, no, it’s not hot, but—”

“Sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

Keika rubbed her face. As a servant, she’d been out of place taking Shushou to task. She dried her tears and blinked her vision into focus. Kneeling at her feet, Shushou looked up at Keika apologetically.

“I’m really sorry. I’m just not in a very good mood.”

“No—it’s—I’m okay.”

“You’d better take this off. Maybe you got burned.”

“I’m fine. It was only warm.”

“You can’t very well return to you living quarters like this. It’s freezing cold outside. You’ll catch your death. Wait here. I’ll get you a change of clothes.”

Shushou ran to her room, banged around her closets, and returned with a pretty silk kimono. She held it out to Keika. “It’s an old thing but it should fit you, Keika. Here, take it. It’s yours.”

“But, Miss—” said the startled Keika.

“It’s okay. It was my fault. I’ll explain everything to your mother and father. Don’t you like it? I’ll let you pick something else.”

“No, no, this is fine!”

“I really apologize. I lost my temper for a moment. I never intended to do something

like this. Can you forgive me?"

Keika nodded. It wasn't clear to her who was supposed to be forgiving whom for what in the first place. And besides, she'd ended up with such a splendid gift.

"Um, are you sure this is okay? An outfit this nice?" She was pretty sure Shushou had been wearing it only since the New Year.

"If you'll forgive me, then I don't care at all. You'd better put it on before you catch a cold."

"Yes, um, sure."

Keika undressed there on the spot. Shushou helped her into the warm silk.

"I feel like I'm dreaming."

"Really? It's a perfect fit." Shushou picked up the discarded clothing. "I'll wash this."

"You needn't go to such lengths." Keika hastily taking them back. She couldn't allow Shushou to become the cleaning maid as well.

Shushou refused to relinquish them. "If that soup was hot, you could have gotten burned. I cannot with a good conscience do anything less. Don't worry about it. I should be good for more around here than studying all day long. Well, I hope so."

Shushou smiled and set aside Keika's kimono and returned to her chair. "I apologize. The food looks delicious."

She accompanied Keika to her living quarters and explained the situation to her mother and father. After receiving an earful of the expected protestations, she returned to her room.

Shushou sat in the chair and thought. Time passed. She sighed and got to her feet, held up Keika's padded kimono, and gave it a good looking over.

With a small grimace, she said, "I should have thrown my teacup at her." She stared out the bars of the window. "Now it smells like soup."

Chapter 4

[1-4] **B**ehind the main wing of the house was a group of buildings called the "cold room." Facing the kitchen was a well and a washing basin. And then the root cellar and granary. Extending ridgepole to ridgepole, the buildings enclosed the vegetable gardens, stock pen, and a fish pond, along with a mill and abattoir to process the

harvest.

Thickly clad in a padded satin kimono, Shushou ventured out to the cold room about the time morning chores were done.

“Good morning!” an old man named Bashi called out to her.

“Morning, Bashi.”

“I heard that the academy got closed or something.”

“Whatever my father’s been going on about, I don’t want to know. Mind if I feed Hakuto?

“Go right ahead,” Bashi said with a big smile.

Bashi was one of the live-in servants. In the chaos following the death of the empress, he’d lost all his worldly goods, and with only the clothes on his back and his children under his arms, had sought employment here. His three children had been split up among other estates and retail establishments. But all were live-in servants.

“So the headmaster died, eh?” Bashi mused as he led Shushou to the stables. He’d been the stable master as far back a Shushou could remember. “It’s really too bad. Nothing but tales of such savagery abound in Renshou these days.”

“Very true.”

“But thanks to your father, I can rest at ease.”

“I have to wonder how much longer that is going to last.”

“Perish the thought,” Bashi said sadly as they entered the stables.

Shushou liked the smell of the barn. Especially in the winter, the straw bedding, the warmth from the horses and donkeys, created a warm and comfy atmosphere. Her mother complained of the smell when Shushou came back into the house covered in straw dust, but she was sure that was because her mother didn’t like horses to start with.

“Is everybody in a good mood this morning?” she said to each animal in turn as she made her way to the back of the stables. Past the hay bin was her favorite, Hakuto.

“Morning, Hakuto.”

The white beast slumbering on the other side of the fence raised his head. Hakuto was a *moukyoku,* a species of kijuu that resembled a white leopard. Intelligent, highly capable at reading human intentions, and yet gentle and attuned to its master, whom it already understood Shushou to be. It stretched out its neck and purred like a cat.

As Shushou softly called out to the beast, Bashi narrowed his eyes. He invested all his pride and joy in these stables, lived to care for the animals it housed, and treated them no worse than his own children. Watching Shushou exhibit a similar affection couldn’t help but arouse a tang of possessiveness.

Shushou had her hand on the fence and was opening the gate as she glanced over her shoulder at Bashi. “Okay if I play with him for a while?”

The moukyoku had agreeable temperament. Shushou and the kijuu were well accustomed to each other. She often came to the stables and wasn't above pitching in with the chores. So Bashi refrained from listing the do's and don'ts, nodded, and noted that he had things to tend to outside the stables.

Shushou watched Bashi leave, unlatched the gate—as high as her chest—and entered the stall. She sat down and cuddled up to Hakuto, sprawled out on the fluffy dry straw. She hugged its big head, burying her face in his neck, and stroked the soft fur behind his ears. Thanks to Bashi's fastidiousness, Hakuto's fur was as fresh as the straw and bore none of the stink of the wild.

For a few minutes more, Shushou listened to Bashi greeting the other horses. His voice soon died away as he exited the stables. Pricking up her ears, his footsteps grew distant as well.

"All right," said Shushou.

She grinned at Hakuto, stood and left the stall. Making sure no one was looking, she went to the hay bin. She pushed her way through the loose hay, climbed up the stacked bales, and pulled a package from between the bin and the wall. Her travel bags, that she'd secreted there the night before.

Grasping them triumphantly, she waded back through the hay and hurried to the stall. Answering Hakuto's puzzled look with a smile, she got the saddle off the hook on the wall. She'd saddled Hakuto many times before. Realizing they were going out, Hakuto got to his feet.

"Hold on there a minute," Shushou said to him. She took a sheet of paper from her breast pocket. Wrapping her arm around his neck, she explained, "It says not to take Bashi to task over this." Shushou placed the note in the feed box. "And if anybody does, I'll never come back again."

Hakuto gave Shushou a quizzical look.

"Yes, we are going a long ways away, but we'll keep each other company. With your strong legs, we should make good time."

Hakuto, of course, had nothing to say in return, and only curiously blinked his golden brown eyes. Shushou patted his head. "Twenty-seven years. The empress died a whole twenty-seven years ago! Now youma are even appearing in Renshou. More and more people are dying—"

She looked up through the barred skylight of the stables. When a kingdom lost its emperor, the kingdom descended into chaos and youma roamed at will.

"And yet well-meaning adults bar the windows and the doors and say they sleep soundly at night. What foolishness. As long as we have no emperor, the world will deteriorate around us. What must they be thinking?"

Hakuto looked at her like a child not quite getting the gist. Shushou smiled and

took up the reins.

Where the sunlight slanted beneath the eaves, Bashi and his workers sat together and finished up various handiwork and chores. They were amazed at the sight of a moukyoku galloping across the grounds of the "cold room."

"Miss!"

They jumped to their feet and ran out, waving their arms to stop the bolting pair. With an almost lazy leap, the moukyoku soared over them, as if dancing right into the sun.

"Miss!" Bashi called out. "Shushou-sama!"

The moukyoku vaulted over the eaves and bounded across the bright green roof. All Bashi could do was watch as Shushou's bright voice rained down from the sky.

"I'm just off for a little jaunt!"

"What in the world—! Miss!"

"Don't worry! I'll be fine!"

Leaving the confounded Bashi and the other behind in the dust, the moukyoku sprinted up the roof of the main wing. Shushou turned in the saddle and waved goodbye.

The white tail of the moukyoku flashed against the gleaming enamel. The guards posted at the four corners of the estate looked up and pointed at the fleeting kijuu. Shushou laughed and waved and urged the moukyoku on. As they cleared the great roof of the main wing, the endless spring sky reached out before her.

White clouds trailed silky threads across a light blue tableau tinged with pale violet. The tile roofs of Renshou spilled down the slopes beneath her, cresting and falling like ocean waves. As if corralling the city against Ryou'un Mountain behind it, the twisting, entwining barrier walls were bathed in white, tinged by the golden rays of the sun.

Beyond the walls was black earth and green valleys and hills. Everywhere lingered the early signs of spring, suffused with the soft light.

The white kijuu kicked off the waves of tile, landed on the nearby wall, and with a sidelong look at the startled sentinels ran along the top of the battlements. The galloping moukyoku glanced back at Shushou with a look that said, *You sure this is okay?*

"It's fine. It's fine. The only moukyoku in Renshou is you, Hakuto. Nobody's going to take a shot at Banko's kijuu."

Shushou smiled at Hakuto as she took in the sun-drenched countryside. "I simply couldn't abide sitting around twiddling my thumbs. If no adults are going to step up, then I will!"

Where to? Hakuto seemed to ask with a second glance back.

Shushou said, urging the kijuu towards the outskirts of Renshou, “To Mt. Hou! We’re going on the Shouzan!”

Chapter 5

[1-5] **I**n the center of the world was the Yellow Sea.

The Yellow Sea was a dry sea, equal in size to any of the surrounding kingdoms. It was a land that lay outside civilized law and order, where youma roamed at will. The Yellow Sea was the domain of neither humans nor gods. The one exception were the Five Mountains in the middle of the Yellow Sea, known collectively as the *Gozan.*

The Gozan was home to the gardens of the mountain wizards and *Seioubo,* the “Queen Mother of the West.”

Gods and humans did not mingle together. People could only pray at the ancestral shrines, and the priests and wizards participated in the shaping of the world only by absorbing into themselves the prayers uttered there.

Supposing that the Five Mountains were indeed the gardens of the wizards, and the Yellow Sea the province of the youma, this still remained a world unconnected to human habitation. Mt. Hou alone was not entirely divorced from mortal concerns.

Mt. Hou, also known as *Taishan,* was the holy ground where those divine creatures, the kirin, were born. The kirin were magical beings of great power. Exercising affection and compassion, wise both to the Way and the reason of the world, they heard the Divine Will of Heaven as dictated by Providence.

The human world was divided into twelve kingdoms, each ruled by a emperor or empress. They were not chosen according to their bloodline or their meritorious accomplishments. Only the Divine Will of Heaven could place a person on the throne. That meant it was up to the kirin to choose.

The kirin were born on Mt. Hou, reared and protected there by the wizardesses. Traveling to Mt. Hou and ascertaining the Divine Will of Heaven from the kirin was known as the *Shouzan.*

Of course, going on the Shouzan required making it to Mt. Hou in the middle of the Yellow Sea. The steep, towering ridges rising above the Sea of Clouds were sealed off to airborne travelers. And then there were the Kongou Mountains.

The mountain range was steep and inaccessible, impossible to scale. There were only four routes through the Kongou Mountains, each blocked by a mighty gate. These

were the four Command Gates. Each gate opened only once a year. To the northwest, the Reiken Gate abutted Ken County in the Kingdom of Kyou. It opened on the spring equinox. For one day.

Shushou had left Renshou with the goal of arriving by the spring equinox. The moukyoku was not an adept flyer, but by air and on land he put the miles behind them at a pace three times that of a horse. It was a long way to the Reiken gate, not a distance Shushou could have covered on foot. The moukyoku reduced the hardships of the journey by a good third.

What's more, Shushou had left home with considerable traveling money in hand. She knew that her father had been building a rainy-day fund to cover urgent living expenses in case something happened in Renshou and they had to hurry off to a safe house.

He would probably try to track her down, but with their numbers diminished by youma and disasters, finding a single lost child was unlikely to command the urgent attention of the constabulary. Few had a faster kijuu than the master of the Sou family, so catching up with her would be well-nigh impossible.

The Sou family operated establishments through Kyou, though not in every city and town. They could dispatch "blue bird" carrier pigeons, but with no idea where Shushou was headed, they wouldn't know where to have somebody waiting for her.

Shushou had figured all along she'd simply drop in on whatever city was closest along the route and work something out along the way. She had no sense of being pursued. The evening of the sixth day after leaving Renshou, she'd made it two-thirds of the way to the Reiken Gate.

"Well, then—"

Shushou set Hakuto down in the deserted fields surrounding a town. It wasn't too big and not too small. She didn't enter the town right away but set off again in search of the graveyard.

These towns all connected to the highway in the south and placed the graveyards in the north. Wanting to stay out of public view and settle her nerves first, Shushou circled around to the north. The town was small enough that in a corner of the field, the golden roof of the cemetery shrine soon came into view.

Many of these cemeteries had no fences or walls. This one was no different. Neither was the patch of ground defined by a cluster of new graves, a scene she'd observed in each of the six towns she'd stopped at so far. The fresh mounds of earth were painted white by the catalpa branches stuck into the ground. People were dying here too.

Shushou set Hakuto down next to the cemetery shrine. Cemetery shrines were, by and large, stark and uninviting buildings. Unlike the ancestral shrines that occupied

the city centers, the cemetery shrine stood alone. The walls barely kept out the wind and rain. In an alcove lacking even a door was an altar where respects could be paid to the dead.

The only dead buried in the potter's field of this town had died far from home, so the altar saw little in the way of memorial services. Behind the altar was a small annex where the dead could be temporarily housed until they were buried. There wasn't much more to the cemetery shrine than that.

Shushou went to the well next to the shrine, removed the well cover, and drew out a bucket of water for Hakuto. She squatted down next to him. Stroking his neck, she took in the rest of the graveyard, one that had become all too familiar during the journey. In fact, it seemed that with every new town, the number of graves only multiplied.

"That's what becomes of us when we die."

Placed in a coffin, buried in a hole in the ground, the earth piled up—and that was the end.

Some said the dead were reborn in Yamato at the eastern reaches of the Kyokai and became wizards. Or their spirits flew off to Mt. Kouri in the midst of Mt. Hou. There an accounting was made of their sins, and according to their good and bad deeds they were given positions in the world of the gods.

Shushou wasn't the only one who thought this a bit fishy. If it was really true, then the number of the dead would only grow until *Gyokkei,* the legendary home of the Gods, became jam-packed.

Others claimed that the dead were reincarnated. Except that Shushou had never heard the reincarnation of her dead grandmother calling out to her. If she'd been reborn in a different form, with no memory even of Shushou, then her grandmother had hardly come back again. That'd make her little more than a stranger.

In any case, Shushou thought, staring out at the graveyard, a person's final resting place was a sad and lonely place.

The surrounding fields served as a fire break to spare the town from wildfires. Houses, barns and crops were forbidden. The bleak, shorn meadows spread outwards. Only here in the rubble-strewn wasteland was the earth exposed in mounds. Catalpa shoots fluttered in the winter wind, here and there fallen over, with no grave tender to straighten them.

The dead were usually born back to their home towns by their families. A child, grandchild, sibling or parent heard the news, and no matter how far away, would come as quickly as they could. They would bear the body back home and bury it on their own soil, build a mound and plant the catalpa shoots. The wealthy would construct a shrine, make offerings, and yearly on the vigil burn articles of clothing made out of paper.

Even supposing the spirits had already departed, for hearts that longed for and missed them, the least they could do was prepare a vessel to serve as a home for their souls so as not to lose that connection with the dead.

This cemetery had originally been a temporary gravesite for those coming to retrieve their dead. So if a family did not live too far away, the mourning period could be extended and the burial put off for a short while. And this being winter, all the more so.

At the end of the day, buried in this potter's field were the lonely dead who had no living to watch over them. It sounded better to called them wayfarers who had died on their journeys. But anyone who died and whose family did not come to get them was treated the same. Family or no, they lacked the resources or the respect and affection.

And then there were entire families that died at the same time. There were vagabonds on the one hand, and those with families that cared but had no place to bury them on the other, and left them in a potter's field out of necessity.

After seven years, the grave keeper disinterred the unclaimed dead, crushed the coffin together with the bones inside, and reinterred them in the city mausoleum. And that was the end of it.

In any case, the land a person owned was technically on loan from the kingdom, so when the old owner died, a new owner would take possession of it. Normally, people kept their hands off the catalpa trees at the borders of the hamlets. But if somebody inadvertently cut one down and discovered a coffin beneath, they'd dig it up and hand it over to the grave keeper, who would disposed of it in the customary manner.

And so the end inevitably came, for people and every other living thing.

"There are a few things I need to get done first," Shushou muttered to herself, stroking Hakuto's throat. She smiled into those golden brown eyes and took off her satin padded kimono. Beneath it was Keika's thinner padded jacket.

"It's freezing—"

Once the sun began to set, the chill in the air grew fierce. She'd traveled a considerable distance southeast from Renshou, but the weather hadn't improved at all. She'd heard that winter didn't visit kingdoms far to the south like Sou, and had been hoping that things would warm up a bit.

With a sigh of regret, Shushou folded the satin kimono and stuffed it into the traveling pack on Hakuto's back. Now to find an inn to spend the night.

She'd donned Keika's padded kimono—and before that had devised a way to take it off Keika's hands—because she'd imagined that strutting around in her best outfit would make her a prime target for highway robbers.

However, there was still the moukyoku. She needed an inn that had stables equipped to care for him. Except that Shushou certainly did not look like a seasoned

traveler who knew her way around inns, or was wealthy enough to own her own kijuu, and so was likely to arouse suspicions. She'd had the constable called on her once already and had to make a quick getaway.

"I'm pretty much running out of options."

She'd made it this far by pretending to be a servant whose master had ordered her to deliver a kijuu. Except that putting a twelve-year-old in charge of a kijuu and sending her alone on such a journey wasn't any more believable.

To make matters worse, the further south she went, the greater the civil unrest, and the harsher the eyes of the guests. In the last city, she'd skipped the inn and crawled beneath the floorboards of the cemetery shrine. She wasn't looking forward to another night in a graveyard, and wanted to give Hakuto a good night's rest too.

Along with the rack and ruin, public order was worse in the south too. It wasn't that disasters were choosey about the geography, but that the youma were working their way north. Perhaps sensing the youma presence, Hakuto grew especially agitated when the sun set. The night before, he'd growled from sundown to sunup. That was probably the reason for his pace being off today.

Shushou could do worse than search for a *yaboku* to bed down under. She was guaranteed to be safe from harm beneath a yaboku. But she simply didn't have the constitution to sleep out under cold winter skies like these.

She could try her usual routine, put on a teary expression and beseech the nicest-looking innkeeper for a room. Or sidle up to a traveler and tell a pack of lies in order to convince him to let her to tag along. Though these strategies had proved equally futile on more than one occasion.

"What a bother—" Shushou grumbled. When Hakuto answered with a low growl, as if taking her to task, she scratched him beneath his chin. "Sorry. Don't worry about me," she said reassuringly. "At the very least, I'm going to find a nice barn for you tonight."

But that didn't reassure Hakuto. He didn't stop growling as he turned his gaze toward the graveyard.

"What's the matter?"

She wrapped her arms around Hakuto's neck. A faint sound reached her ears. She tightened her hold. It very closely resembled Hakuto's growl, the sound made by a species of tiger. Tigers weren't normally found in Kyou. But youma that resembled tigers were showing up more frequently.

The growl seemed to be coming from behind the cemetery shrine. Shushou hesitated, deciding whether to try and flee, or try to figure out what it was. Running away was the best option, but for some reason she couldn't take off without first ascertaining what it was. At this moment, *not* knowing was the more frightening option.

She wished to do both and wished to do neither. Frozen there in indecision, she again heard the growl. At the same time, a face peeked out from the corner of the shrine.

Shushou choked down the cry in her throat, leapt to her feet and started to run away. With her arms still wrapped around Hakuto's neck, she promptly fell on her face. She picked herself up and looked back at the shrine. And let out a sigh of relief.

"Oh—!"

The head was a size larger than Hakuto's. Though it looked like a tiger, it quickly became apparent that it was not a tiger. She knew from having seen a tiger in a traveling circus that tigers had the same golden brown eyes as Hakuto's. Plus, the reins made it clear that this was a kijuu.

Shushou glared at the creature. "You scared me half to death!" She got to her feet and snuck a look behind the shrine. The kijuu made no attempt to flee, only eyed Shushou carefully.

"But of course. A *suugu.*"

The kijuu behind the cemetery shrine had on a saddle. It lay sprawled on the ground. A tail almost as long as its body reaching out behind it. It raised its head and looked quizzically at Shushou. She peered back into those eyes.

"Wow, you have pretty eyes."

Like a pair of black pearls, but a black all the more intense, as if lit up inside by brilliant points of light. Not even Banko could afford a suugu. Daring and resolute, the fastest of all the kijuu, it was not the kind of animal anyone could easily lay his hands on. She had seen the general of the Imperial Guard leading a procession on one.

Shushou leaned closer, with a tip of her head asking whether it would mind being petted. Kijuu were wild animals at heart, accustomed only to being handled by their masters. This suugu seemed different. She'd heard they were especially intelligent as well.

"Whoa, I'd watch it if I were you."

Shushou literally jumped at the voice, casting a hasty look over her shoulder. A man wrapped in a poncho was standing there.

"A bite from him is just as likely to take off your whole arm as the tips of your fingers." In contrast to the words, though, an affable smile rose to his face.

"Is this your kijuu. It's a suugu, right?"

The man looked to be in his early twenties, even younger when he smiled. His dress was a cut above the average, a good match for the suugu. "I'm impressed. You know what a suugu is."

A suugu, after all, was not the kind of kijuu that ordinary people saw everyday.

"I like kijuu. Do suugu bite?"

"Depends on the temperament. Not often, but I wouldn't say never. Better to play it

safe and keep your hands off."

"No petting?"

The man smiled and knelt down next to the suugu. He put his arm around its neck and said with a nod, "Go ahead. You must really like kijuu."

"I really do," Shushou said, stroking the suugu's broad forehead. The hair was stiffer than it appeared.

"I see. So that moukyoku is the young lady's?"

Shushou glanced at the man's cheerful face. "No, he belongs to my master. His name is Hakuto."

The man laughed softly. "What an interesting girl. She introduces her kijuu before herself."

"What's wrong with that? My name is Shushou."

"This guy is Seisai."

Shushou grinned. "That's a neat name. What about yourself?"

"I'm Rikou."

Looking into his bright, friendly face, a thought struck her. "Are you from around here?" She spied the bags next to the suugu. "No, probably not, considering your bags."

"I'm a traveler."

"Are you staying in this town?"

"That was my intent."

"I have a request. You do seem a man of good character."

"Do I now?" He responded in a voice both curious and amused.

She raised her upturned eyes to his. "My master needs this kijuu delivered right away, but the thought of finding an inn at this hour leaves me ill at ease. It would seem awfully strange for a small girl like me to show up with kijuu in tow. Last night, all the inns turned me away."

"How awful! No inn on a cold night like this?"

"Yes, indeed. I slept in the crawl space of the cemetery shrine. Pretty pathetic, don't you think?"

Rikou's eyes grew a little wider. "That's crazy! Don't you know that youma are popping up all over the place?"

"But I didn't have anyplace else to stay."

"You're a gutsy young lady. What would you do if you were attacked by a youma?"

"It hasn't happened so far. I must be doing something right and haven't done anything to jinx it."

"I don't think that's the actual problem here."

"Spending all my time worrying about it won't accomplish anything. But if I keep on sleeping in cemeteries every night, my luck's bound to run out."

“I wouldn’t disagree with you on that. How far are you going?”

“Um, to Ken.”

Rikou couldn’t hide his surprise. “You mean all the way to the Reiken Gate? That Ken?”

“Yes.”

“You really are testing your luck. By yourself?”

“It’s what the job entails, so I don’t have a choice. You’re staying in an inn, right? You’ll need stables for your suugu, right? I don’t suppose I could accompany you? I’ll pay my half, of course.”

“Eh?”

“Um, well, I had a letter of introduction from my master introducing me as a servant in his household who’d been asked to deliver his moukyoku—so please set your suspicions aside—but I, um, lost it.”

“You don’t say.”

“In any case, if I had to turn back now, my master would give me an earful. He is a *really* scary man. There is no telling what awful fate might befall me. But without that letter of introduction, none of the inns will take me seriously. And so I find myself in a real bind. Please help me out.”

“Huh,” Rikou said, regarding Shushou with unfeigned delight.

“If not, if you simply cannot agree, then take Hakuto. I will sleep in the stables with him. And if that is not acceptable, I’ll do whatever—”

Rikou suddenly laughed. “I understand. A simple enough request. How about I call you my traveling companion?”

“Really? Thank you. I am much obliged.”

Rikou grinned and nodded. He stood up. “We’d better get going before the city gates close.”

“Yes, yes,” said Shushou, racing back to her moukyoku.

Rikou called out after her, “Miss, would you mind a friendly bit of advice?”

Shushou stopped and turned. “What?”

“If you’re going to tell a real whopper of a lie,” Rikou said, a big grin on his face, “I’d wager the more *understated* the lie the better.”

Shushou gaped at him, then turned her face to the heavens and sighed.

Chapter 6

[1-6] **S**hushou pouted, “That’s what the shallow wisdom of a child will get you.”

Thanks to Rikou’s help, they were in the dining hall of the inn. Shushou cradled the teacup in both hands, taking the chill out of her numb hands. She took a long breath and let it out.

“Aw, you didn’t do half bad,” Rikou said with a smile. “I’ve seen worse.” He was seated across the table from her, warming his insides with a tankard of ale.

“You don’t have to feel sorry for me. I meant to do a lot better by myself. It’s just so irritating.”

“That moukyoku is a big part of the problem.”

“I couldn’t possibly make it to Ken without Hakuto. But wearing the kinds of outfits that the owner of a moukyoku *should* wear, I’d make myself a target for every highwayman along the way.”

Raising the tankard to his mouth, Rikou paused. “So you are really going to Ken?”

“I am.”

“Where do you call home?”

“Renshou. I wasn’t about to walk all the way from Renshou to Ken. Besides, I’m in a hurry.”

“You have parents, I assume? And you left against their express wishes to the contrary?”

“They certainly did not expressly wish me *not* to. My going to Ken is hardly the kind of thing they’d be likely to overlook.” She stopped and looked up at Rikou and said, “Well, ah, no. That’s not exactly true. Forget I said it.”

Rikou smiled. “Too late. I’ve heard enough already. Don’t worry. I’m not about to turn you into the authorities. Were you a lost child, though, that’d be another story.”

Shushou sighed. “I know enough to stay on my toes. But you struck me as a goodhearted person, so I wasn’t watching my tongue.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Rikou chuckled. “So I assume you left without telling anybody?”

“Yeah. I ran away from home.”

“My, my. Now things are getting serious. And all the way to Ken? What business do you have there?”

“The Reiken Gate is there. I am going to Mt. Hou. Which isn’t to say that I know anybody who lives on Mt. Hou.”

The smile vanished from Rikou’s face. He blinked. “Young lady, are you going on the Shouzan?”

“Any reason why I shouldn’t?”

For a long moment, Rikou stared intently at Shushou’s face. Feeling a touch of self-consciousness, she met the look with upturned eyes.

“No reason.” Rikou nodded. “No reason at all. However, it’s still a long ways from here to Ken. I came from the south. Things are even more chaotic down there than they are here. Finding a place to bed down at night will become increasingly difficult.”

“Oh.” Shushou bit her lip. She didn’t like admitting it to herself but it’d been naive of her to think that a moukyoku alone would spare her most of the hardship on this journey.

“That’s right. You need to have something in writing: *The child bearing this letter has been entrusted with a kijuu. Please accommodate her in any way you can.* Something like that. Get it stamped with an official seal and nobody will give it a second look. Because no matter how you dress it up, a young girl traveling alone with a kijuu is an odd sight.”

Shushou’s eyes opened a bit wider. “Can you help me out?”

“Do you understand what kind of journey you have ahead of you before you get to Mt. Hou?”

“I understand. It’s dangerous, right?”

“Sure is.” Rikou nodded and smiled again. “As long as you understand that much, then sure, why not?

The next morning, Rikou had a letter of introduction notarized by the local representative of the Ministry of Fall. Shushou wasn’t familiar with the precise process, as the government building wasn’t the kind of place where a girl her age could just wander around. So she stayed outside with Hakuto and Rikou’s suugu.

“Think this will do?”

The substance of the certificate Rikou presented to her reflected their conversation the night before. The notary’s name and affixed seal turned it into an imposing-looking document.

“Thank you,” she said, though not without a moment of hesitation.

“Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, but—”

Her father was identified as the owner of the kijuu and Shushou as the courier. She couldn’t have Rikou’s name on the document and risk him later showing up to claim Hakuto, though she didn’t believe Rikou was the kind of person who would do such a thing. Had her father’s name been written using the characters by which he was commonly known, there was no telling where in the Sou business empire it might come to light. Using his formal given name, though, that was much less of a concern.

In any case, Shushou still couldn’t imagine how a traveler like Rikou had managed to secure an official seal.

“Where are you from?” she asked him.

“A long ways away.”

“How long a ways?”

“Sou. Do you know where Sou is?”

“Sure. It’s a kingdom in the south. Pretty famous, isn’t it?”

The Kingdom of Sou was known for its long-lived dynasty and its wealth. Rikou definitely did not hail from around here.

The Ministry of Fall not only prosecuted lawbreakers, but notarized contracts and other important documents, and publically certified that official papers were authentic and in proper order. Shushou had learned this at the prefectural academy. Now she had to wonder how trustworthy a document bearing the seal of the Ministry of Fall really was.

Considering the nature of the thing, she couldn’t imagine that a government clerk would stamp any odd piece of paper presented to him. At the very least, the bearer would have to establish his bona fides. Because Rikou was a traveler, that would mean his passport. On top of that, the document didn’t even have Rikou’s name on it.

“What?” he asked.

“Oh, I was just wondering how you got the seal of the Ministry of Fall on that certificate.”

“Ah.” Rikou smiled. “That is because I am a much better teller of tall tales than you, young lady.”

“And have you been telling them to me?”

“Not to *you,*” Rikou said with a broad smile. He took up the reins of the suugu. “A little of touch of this and a little touch of that. There’s a way to getting these things done, you know.”

Shushou reached into the pocket of her kimono. “How much?”

“How much what?” Rikou blinked.

“That what it came down to, didn’t it? I’ll cover whatever it cost you. How much did the clerk take you for?”

“Where would a nice girl like you learn something like that?”

“I’m the daughter of a merchant. It comes with the territory.”

Rikou laughed and patted Shushou on the arm. “I’m afraid you didn’t catch my drift.”

“But—”

Rikou crouched down in front of her. “The shops will all be opening pretty soon, right?”

“Yes. That’s true.”

“And all the merchants and shopkeepers are going to show up with any paperwork they need to get done. First thing in the morning, the Ministry of Fall will be swamped.”

“Oh. I suppose so.”

“Amidst the confusion, a man comes running in with the story of an unfortunate lass who’d lost her father a few towns over.”

“You mean, me?”

“That’d be you. The dead man worked for his brother. He was delivering a kijuu with his daughter. Alas, they were attacked by highwaymen along the way, and he died protecting his dear daughter. The tough-minded girl managed to get away. Having a strong sense of responsibility, rather than mourn his passing, she felt compelled to complete the job her father had undertaken. She continued on the journey, her sad tears freezing on her cheeks in this frigid winter weather. Unfortunately, the burden of the kijuu now prevents her from securing lodgings—”

“Um—” said Shushou, tugging at his sleeve.

Caught up in his own story, Rikou continued: “What a brave young woman! Don’t you think? Such are the times we live in. Regardless of who was working for whom, they were, first and foremost, brothers. What a cruel man this uncle of hers must be!”

“That’s what you said?”

“The clerk knows when the shops are going to open. So he’ll want to take care of any business before him as soon as possible. And here is this man going on and on, burdening him with the sad tale of an unfortunate girl.”

“And trying his patience.”

Rikou laughed heartily. “There are times when the best recourse is to tell the biggest whale of a lie you can imagine.”

“This is all very instructive.” Shushou shrugged and looked up at him. “Do you mind my asking why you’re doing all this for me?”

Rikou stood and again took hold of the suugu’s reins. “I’ll take a pass on that, if you don’t mind. I haven’t asked you why you’re going on the Shouzan, have I?

“I don’t mind. It’s all the same to me. Because no worthy person has yet stepped forth.”

“Really? Well, take care of yourself.”

“I should be all right, thanks to you.”

“Getting to Ken is one thing. After that is when your true character must rise to the fore.”

“Oh, um, thanks.”

Rikou smiled and urged on the suugu. Shushou watched as the two of them disappeared into the distance.

Chapter 7

[1-7] **T**hanks to the certificate Rikou had finagled for her, Shushou didn't have any difficulty securing lodgings after that. She proceeded directly as planned along the provincial roads to the Black Sea.

Shushou had never seen the ocean before. This wasn't surprising, as she had rarely left Renshou. Taken aback by the broad expanse of water, for the first time she felt a pang of helplessness in her heart.

To Shushou, born and raised in Renshou, wrapped in the embrace of the Ryou'un Mountains, such a view keenly impressed on her the sensation of being literally at the end of the road with nowhere else to turn.

"This world sure has all kinds of places in it. Well, let's go, Hakuto."

She petted the anxious Hakuto, who was no doubt reflecting Shushou's own sense of unease. The kijuu shook it off and rode like the wind.

They traveled south along the coastal road for several days to the city of Rinken. Rinken was located at the southernmost point of Kyou. Across the Ken Straits was Ken County, the city of Ken, and the Reiken Gate.

"Six days until the spring equinox. Thanks to you, Hakuto."

And Rikou.

Perched on his back, Shushou gave Hakuto an encouraging pat on the neck and he took off. For reasons she didn't understand, Hakuto was no less eager to press on. When the wind blew in from the south, he shook off the fatigue of the journey and picked up the pace again.

Were Shushou not holding tight to the reins, the kijuu showed every intent of plunging across that broad expanse of blue before their eyes.

"There's no need to be in such a hurry. You're going to hurt your feet like you did yesterday."

However Shushou pulled on the reins, Hakuto's speed did not slacken as he galloped along the roads threading among the mountains and fields, leaping clean over the forests and groves. With every town left behind, Shushou bent another finger. One more and they'd be at Rinken.

The sun was almost touching the ridgelines of the western mountains. Though there was still time before the sky turned amber, Hakuto's fleeting form painted long shadows on the ground below. So far on her journey, Shushou had learned that when the dusk came, not only did the tint of the mountains darken all the more, but so did the seas.

Hakuto cleared a hamlet with a small hop. Rinken came into view. At the same time, for a brief moment, *that* did as well.

"Hakuto—"

Shushou drew back on the reins. Hakuto didn't stop in mid-air, but began to descend in a falling arc. This was not, for Hakuto, normal behavior. Fixated on *that,* Shushou's eyes met empty air.

"Hakuto—jump—"

As soon as Hakuto alighted on the ground, he vaulted into the sky with all his might. Hakuto's field of view opened up. Astride his back, Shushou took in the great expanse of the sight before them.

Slight signs of spring played across the countryside below them. The nearby hamlet was charred and black, burned by fire. But at that moment, the scars in the earth did not register in her senses. Instead, her eyes focused on the far horizon—

Beyond the coastline fringed by whitecaps, beyond the promontory jutting into the sea and the port city at its base, beyond the great gray sweep of the sea, shimmering in the haze—

The rising slopes melted into the blue sky. The ridgelines stood out as only a slightly different shade of blue, like the azure shadow of a wall cast against all that vast blue.

Bands of fading purple wrapped around the towering enormity floated beyond the sea.

Faintly silhouetted by the setting sun, *that* stretched out in great bands across the water. One notch in the ridgeline—that seemed sculpted out of decorative granite—glowed brightly, stretching out to the left and right until finally fading into the midst.

"The Kongou Mountains."

They were so *big.*

Shushou felt goosepimples shiver across her skin. In that stunned moment, she let go of the reins. Scrambling for them, she felt Hakuto's hair standing on end as well, as if ruffled backwards by the wind.

This was the barrier wall around the Yellow Sea. Beyond that huge wall was a land hostile to human habitation. And in the center was the Gozan, the Five Mountains.

I've made it, she thought. *And those are—* Even having grown up at the foot of Mt. Ryou'un, the immensity of these mountains were beyond belief.

Hakuto reached the zenith of his leap and fell in a graceful arc, gradually building up speed. That hazy, blue wall disappeared behind the screen of the nearby hills.

"The Kongou Mountains!" Shushou exclaimed. She buried her face in the fur of Hakuto's neck. "Let's go, Hakuto. Those are the Kongou Mountains!"

Hakuto kicked off the ground, accelerating so fast he almost bucked Shushou off his back. He climbed the hills, descended the gentle slope to the provincial road, and shot past the Rinken city gate. Shushou did not pull back on the reins.

Hakuto overran the end of the road, bounded over a knoll thick with shrubs, and

there reached the headlands of the promontory. Before them was the blue sea and the silhouette of the Kongou Mountains hovering like a mirage above the far horizon.

Shushou watched as the purple-banded blue faded to indigo. The ridgelines glittered white from the light of the setting sun before dissolving into the sepia dusk. Before she knew it, she had all but lost track of time.

Chapter 8

[1-8] **R**inken was a port city with a harbor. Ships departed for Ken County once a day. Hakuto couldn't leap across the broad expanse of the sea. But even a flying kijuu could book passage on a sailing ship, which was certainly a lot easier on the kijuu.

Filling their faded gray sails with the brisk breeze, a ship could cross the Ken Straits in half a day. Leaving port in the morning, it passed the ship returning to Rinken shortly past noon, and slipped into the harbor on the opposite shore around evening.

Shushou spent the time on the deck looking at the mountains. On several occasions youma-like creatures swept through the air above them, but none of them attacked the ship and she didn't have to retreat to her cabin.

Catching remnants of the *joufuu,* the ship knifed through the water, leaving a white wake behind. The shadows cast on the deck by the sails shortened, turned toward the east, and lengthened again. Looking beyond the silhouette of the ship returning to the mainland, the Kongou Mountains already filled the entire sky.

A bell rang out when the ship entered the harbor. The sound reverberated across the waves before being swallowed up by the surf.

"Looks like we got here in one piece," Shushou declared with a triumphant air as she descended the gangplank. From here to Ken would take three days on foot, no more than a day riding Hakuto.

The ship had arrived in the city of North Ken, the gateway to Ken County. Because Ken County was on the frontier, it was not too large and finding lodgings shouldn't be too taxing.

Mingling with the other passengers going ashore, they entered the city and turned down the main thoroughfare where the inns should be located.

Shushou felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned around to find a smiling middle-aged man with a round face looking down at her. "Miss, that's a moukyoku,

isn't it?"

Shushou had heard the question plenty of times on her journey. She clearly wasn't alone in her love of kijuu.

"That's right."

The man crouched down and petted the white fur with soft, childlike hands. "A splendid kijuu and very well trained. What nice eyes. He sure looks well taken care of." The man smiled and scratched Hakuto behind the ears. He looked up at Shushou and said, "This is the first time I've seen such a splendid moukyoku. It is yours?"

"No. This is my master's kijuu."

The man eyed Shushou's worn kimono, grinned and nodded. "Really? I suppose so. Are you responsible for his care, or would that be your master?"

"My master prizes him very highly, just as I care for him a great deal."

"Of course, of course." The man bobbed his head as he got to his feet. "What a fine master you must have. He who cares for his kijuu cares for his servants no less."

"I wouldn't say that was *always* true." Shushou glanced up at him. "I need to find an inn."

"What, are you in the midst of a journey?"

"I am. Do you live in this town? Perhaps you could direct me to an inn with good stables?

"I don't know about what makes stables good or not, but I am familiar with an inn where kijuu owners like to congregate. Shall I show you the way?"

"You needn't go to such lengths. Directions would be fine."

"No problem. Just once I'd like to hold the reins of a kijuu. In exchange for me showing you the way, how about you let me lead the kijuu?"

"Sorry, but I couldn't do that. I'd catch a scolding if my master found out I'd let his moukyoku be handled by anybody else."

"That's too bad," the man said in a regretful tone. But he smiled. "You are a cautious young lady. Whoever entrusted that kijuu to you, though, most definitely is not."

The man's face split into a broad grin. He grabbed Shushou by the arm.

"Hey—!"

What are you doing, she was about to say, when the man shouted, "Thief!"

"What?"

Shushou looked up at him in amazement. People passing by paused and turned their attention to him.

"This is my kijuu! Give it back, you stupid little kid!"

For a moment, Shushou gaped at the man's round face, struck dumb by the sudden transformation.

"What's going on?" somebody in the growing crowd asked.

“This brat stole my kijuu!” he spit out. “Unbelievable, kids these days! Can’t take your eyes off them for a second!”

The man wrenched Shushou’s arm, prompting a yelp of pain. “No!” she managed to blurt out, though she couldn’t be sure that she’d made herself heard.

“Hold on a minute,” came a woman’s voice from the crowd. “That kijuu belongs to the girl. We were both on the boat coming over.”

“Yeah, she stole it from me in Rinken! I thought there was something fishy about the way she was hanging around my kijuu.”

“Well—”

“That’s not true!” Shushou raised her voice, but with her arm feeling like it was about to rip out of its socket, she couldn’t find the words to say anything more.

“What’s not true? Look! I’ve got the papers to prove it!” The man drew documents from his breast pocket and unfurled them for all to see. “This one proves the kijuu is mine. And this one says it was stolen. Both bear official seals!”

The wall of people surrounding them shifted their sympathetic gaze from Shushou to the man.

“Unbelievable,” the man hissed, giving Shushou’s arm another twist. “There are surely unsavory masterminds behind this all. There’s no way a kid like you would be put in charge of transporting a kijuu! That’s got to be the dumbest thing I ever heard! It should make anybody suspicious.”

The man gave Shushou a shove and sent her flying.

“It’s not dumb!” Shushou cried out. “That’s my kijuu!” She reached into her own pocket and pulled out the certificate Rikou had prepared for her. “If you want papers, I have papers too!”

The words had barely left her mouth when the man yanked it out of her grasp and tore it into pieces. “Worth the paper it’s printed on!”

The man’s shamelessly overbearing manner stunned her. Tossing the shredded paper aside, he next set to stripping the travel packs off Hakuto’s back and tossing them onto the ground.

“Be grateful I don’t hand you over to the authorities,” he called out, and jumped into the saddle. Hakuto cast Shushou a brief, bewildered look. The man dug his heel hard into his sides. Hakuto bolted away in a panicked sprint.

“Wait! Wait! Hakuto!”

The congested street parted before Hakuto and swallowed up the beast and rider. Shushou gathered herself up and bolted after them. Someone behind her grabbed her by the shoulders.

“Let me go!”

“What should we do? Call the constable?”

“But the man who says she stole from him—”

Shushou shouted at the jabbering adults, “I’ve got the notarized papers right here. He’s the real thief!”

With a curious glance at Shushou and then at the disappearing form of Hakuto, one of her fellow travelers plucked the scraps of paper off the street and pieced them together.

His mouth dropped open. “Hey, these are the real thing!”

“That’s what I’ve been saying! How can a bunch of adults be so stupid!”

While half of the onlookers who’d gathered around her scurried away, the other half peered at the certificate.

“Yeah, it’s got an authentic seal.”

“What about his?”

“Only caught a glance. Did anybody get a good look?”

As the adults stood there and chatted, Shushou shook herself free and ran off in the direction she’d last seen Hakuto. But the kijuu was nowhere to be seen on the crowded high street. Several adults tailed after her and assisted in a cursory search. They concluded only that the thief and the moukyoku had left through the main gate.

“Sorry about that, Miss.”

The man held out Shushou’s bags. He’d picked them up for her. Shushou took them from him. The two travel bags that had been slung across Hakuto’s back now dwarfed Shushou as she hugged her arms around them. She sunk to her knees and let out a long sigh.

“Um, Miss, are you going to report this to the constable?”

Shushou looked up at him. “Won’t the government offices be closed by now?”

“Then tomorrow?”

“I appreciate your concern. Thanks for getting my bags. And helping me look for Hakuto.”

“Ah, no problem.”

Shushou again checked out her surroundings. Dusk had settled on the town. Hakuto was nowhere to be seen.

“There’s nothing else I can do now but keep pressing forward, and all the more so without Hakuto.”

She looked at the people standing around her in confusion. The remainder of her itinerary would take an adult three days on foot. For Shushou, things would get a lot chancier. But she had no choice but to struggle on and see things to the end.

“Can anybody point me to a quiet, safe inn? I guess it doesn’t have to have stables.”

Part Two

Chapter 9

[2-1] **T**he morning of the Spring Equinox, the innkeeper saw off the girl and the man she'd hired as her bodyguard, the concern evident on his face.

Gankyuu held the reins of the haku as they walked along the dark streets, swept along by the throngs. He sighed mightily. He had patiently explained during breakfast how crazy an idea this was. Not only did his remonstrations go in one ear and out the other, but Shushou lay her head on the table and took a nap.

He was left with no choice but to resign himself to the situation.

Gankyuu was no stranger to life in the Yellow Sea. Many people were going on the Shouzan and many of them brought along family members and bodyguards and hearty kijuu.

Escorting the girl to Mt. Hou and back again, not straying into dangerous territory in search of kijuu, was hardly impossible. He'd never worked in that capacity before but was familiar with the bodyguards—known in the trade as *goushi* or "guardians"—who made a living at it, and was friends with several of them. He'd heard his fair share of hard-luck stories. He figured he could weather it well enough.

While she was on Mt. Hou, he could work in a little kijuu hunting on the side. *Not bad work for sixty-five ryou,* he reminded himself over and over.

"Hey, Gankyuu."

The handful of trouble he was stuck with hunched her shoulders against the cold and glanced guilelessly up at him.

"What?" he said.

"What are you wearing that poncho for?"

Instead of answering, Gankyuu clucked to himself. The reason he had the poncho draped over his head like a shawl was to keep from being spotted by his mates. He didn't want it noised about that he was escorting a child across the Yellow Sea. He'd never hear the end of it.

"Son of a bitch," he grumbled.

Shushou laughed. "You don't know when to bow to the inevitable. You need the money, don't you?"

Damn straight, he said to himself. Gankyuu glanced down at her. She'd removed her two-piece *ruqun* and replaced it with the humble underjacket he'd scrounged up the night before, and then wrapped her padded kimono around that.

He'd expected her to bitch and moan about taking off the ruqun and sneer at the

underjacket even more. But without him pointing out that the long sleeves would be a pain to deal with, she'd agreed to the change without any fuss, thank heaven.

"Where did a girl like you come up with money like that?"

"I didn't steal it, if that's what you are implying. I took whatever I could find lying about the house."

"You *what*?"

"Including the kijuu. But the kijuu was stolen by a bad-tempered man like you. A sad and sordid tale. And then to have my lodgings practically stolen out from under me. You adults really are a sorry lot."

Gankyuu couldn't help thinking that she'd broken even on the stealing business. He said, "A kijuu?"

"Named Hakuto. A moukyoku. Do you know the species?"

Shushou recounted how her moukyoku was stolen as they checked out the street stalls. The stores opened this early for travelers who'd left necessary purchases to the last minute. Although he'd put together provisions for two the night before, Gankyuu scanned the store fronts as well.

"He was tame and well-mannered, fast on his feet, so smart it was like he understood what I was thinking." Shushou's lips drew a tightly in frustration and regret.

"I see. That was a bad move on your part, Miss."

"What do you mean?"

Gankyuu picked out a few dried apricots and tucked them away. He said over his shoulder, "Moukyoku are good around people. Not only yours, the whole species. Moukyoku in the Yellow Sea can be coaxed along with a little bait. They're three-quarters of the way to becoming kijuu from the start, willing to trust anybody who calls out to them. You can't hand over the reins of a moukyoku to anybody, especially in a busy city. You have to remain extra wary until you're safely in a stables with trustworthy guards."

"Really?"

"Really. Getting out of the saddle was your first mistake. You should count yourself lucky he didn't haul you off to the constable."

"If he did that, I would have come out on top. I've got the papers to prove it."

"I bet he did too. As authentic as yours."

Shushou blinked. "Authentic? How could his be authentic?"

"There are plenty of crafty hunters like them about. They do their hunting in Ken Province, not the Yellow Sea. Because hunters going to the Yellow Sea are bound to have kijuu. They probably had their eyes on you since Rinken. They pick out a kijuu boarding the ship and send a carrier pigeon to North Ken. Something like, *There's a moukyoku headed your way.* Their colleagues in North Ken then select the proper

certificates from the ones they've already got on hand, nab the moukyoku and make off with it. Since they handle a lot of kijuu, they've got a certificate for every one they're bound to encounter."

Shushou lapsed into a silent sulk.

"They would have secured a theft report from their colleagues in Rinken. They've got a whole network dedicated to stealing and selling kijuu. Yours is probably in the Kingdom of Han by now. I wouldn't count on getting it back."

"I am going to remember this," Shushou said under her breath. When Gankyuu looked at her, she said, "When I ascend the throne, I'll have them all rounded up. I swear, they are going to regret this."

Gankyuu's shoulder's fell in dismay. "Going on the Shouzan isn't enough? You're already planning on becoming Empress?"

"What else does one go on the Shouzan for?"

"And you think you'll be the one chosen?"

"Anything wrong with thinking so?"

"Not at all," Gankyuu grumbled.

A moukyoku wasn't a bad kijuu, certainly worth targeting by the criminal element. It'd fetch a fine price. A family that owned one would be well off. Upon a closer look, the kid had a genteel air about her and didn't shrink from ordering people around. This well-bred girl, treated with kid gloves her whole life and naive to the ways of the world, had let it go to her head and launched herself on the Shouzan. He'd never heard anything like it before. But seeing it for himself, it didn't strike him as all that strange.

"At least you can be grateful they didn't rob you of your money as well."

"That's why I took off my ruqun when traveling. Dressed like a pauper, nobody would believe a child like me was carrying that much money, right?"

"That's very clever."

"It's common sense."

"I wouldn't be so sure."

"Why?" she said, tilting her head up at him.

Gankyuu patted the kijuu. "Couldn't I just as well take off with all your money here?"

Shushou sighed. "You're not as smart as you think you are. Your name is Gankyuu. You're a corpse hunter, well known to that innkeeper. If you ran away, I would report you to the authorities at once. Do you know what province this is?"

"I Province." Ken County was a detached administrative territory of the capital province.

"That's right. I am no stranger to the government officials of I Province. Or rather, my father isn't. In North Ken, I was in a hurry so I gave it a pass. But if I ended up

missing the Spring Equinox, you could count on me pursuing every legal option available."

"Yes, Ma'am." *Hells bells,* Gankyuu cursed to himself. *What a shrewd little kid.* "But what if somebody shut your mouth for good? Not a few people enter the Yellow Sea never to be seen or heard from again. *I couldn't carry the body out, Your Honor, and had to leave her there.* Hard to made any of those legal options stick in that case."

Shushou snorted through her nose. "That is not likely to happen either."

"Why not?"

"If *I* die, then *nobody* will become Empress. It is unlikely the Gods would let such an injustice pass without a righteous response."

Gankyuu's shoulders sagged again. "Look—"

Shushou smiled and held Gankyuu's hand. "When my moukyoku was stolen, I was afraid I wouldn't make it in time for the Spring Equinox. But we've arrived right on time. Heaven must be smiling down upon us."

"Sure seems that way."

"When I become Empress, I am not going to do bad things. You are a lucky man."

Gankyuu took a deep breath and let it out. *Where the hell does such confidence spring from?* "Mt. Hou is a long way away."

"No problem. I knew we'd have a kijuu."

But yours got stolen, Gankyuu was about to say. Shushou glanced at his haku and said, "I heard you say you'd left a kijuu in the stables. That's why I hired you."

Shrewd was right. Even at her age, she was far too scheming to be called *precocious.* There was no denying the look of resignation in his shoulders as he slumped a bit in his stride. "I'm impressed."

Shushou patted him on the back. "Compared to me, there's nothing for you to get discouraged about. Anyway, back home, I'm known as the brightest kid in the neighborhood too."

Gankyuu didn't have it in him say yay or nay. His shoulders only slumped further.

Chapter 10

[2-2] **G**ankyuu silently walked on. Shushou had to run a little to keep up. Unlike Gankyuu, her footsteps were light. The road before dawn was cold and covered with frost. A child's stride made the distance all the longer. Even worse, she'd covered the

three-day journey from the port city at a half-run, and a single night's rest had done little to alleviate the fatigue.

But Shushou barely noticed it at all.

She'd really worried about getting to the gate before the Spring Equinox. But not only had she arrived the night before, she'd secured herself a guide to boot.

Shushou knew there were professional guides who escorted people on the Shouzan, quite necessary when venturing into the Yellow Sea. Alas, despite arriving in time, the theft of Hakuto hadn't left her with enough time to hire a proper guardian. That she'd had the good luck of finding a guide experienced in the Yellow Sea led her to believe that no matter what happened next, she would figure something out.

Right now, curiosity overwhelmed any feelings of anxiety. Following the barrier wall, Gankyuu strode south. Though the boulevards weren't as big as those in Renshou, the presence of lane partitions was unusual. The intersections of the main roads in Renshou had nothing of the sort, only street-wide square plazas.

In this city, the intersections were dominated by structures as wide as the roads. Some were made out of stone and secured on all sides by iron doors. The barrier walls and ramparts jutted out here and there. The stores and shops lining the streets were equipped with gates and sturdy doors.

Carried by the human tide to the southeast, Shushou surveyed her surroundings with intrigued eyes. Eventually they arrived at a single gate.

"To imagine there'd be a gate in a place like this," Shushou said, raising her voice.

The loop road that circumnavigated the city inside the barrier walls emptied into the large plaza before the gate. Streams of people spilled into the plaza and collected there as if in a sluice pond. Before them, the watchtowers bracketing the huge gate soared into the sky.

Shushou glanced up at Gankyuu. "This is the southeast?"

Gankyuu let out a long breath. "That's right."

He tilted his head back to take in the five story pagodas. County seats and castle towns were usually surrounded by twelve gates at the twelve cardinal directions. The city of Ken did not have a Dragon Gate or a Serpent Gate. Instead, as if the southeast corner had been cleanly lopped off, a separate, larger gate, opening toward the mountains, had been placed there.

"The Earth Gate."

The looming mountains seemed to press down against the gate. Beyond the layered ranges, the faint peaks were finely etched against the pre-dawn sky. A great black wall blocked the way. The summits reached out to the left and right like the sharp teeth of a lumberjack's saw, melting into the distance while dissolving into the grey morning air.

The Kongou Mountains. Torn out of the skyscraping peaks and spires, a single

road continued on and on. This was one of only four routes into the Yellow Sea.

Because it led to the Yellow Sea, this gate was taller and sturdier than any of the other city gates. Once a year, the doors of the Reiken Gate swung open and the magical beasts that made their homes in the Yellow Sea flooded forth. Or rather, they once did. These were vestiges from that time.

The outer borders of the Yellow Sea and the Earth Gates saw the construction of tall and sturdy towers. More centuries passed before a rugged fortress was built within the Yellow Sea. The youma no longer poured forth, leaving the Earth Gate to stand there in all its mostly meaningless majesty.

"An impressive gate," Shushou said in hushed awe.

"You know, it's not too late to reconsider. Take a look at the preparations. They go to such lengths to open the gate once a year for one day. Every building in this city is made out of stone. All of the courtyards are covered. That's because of the youma."

Not a single courtyard was open to the sky. The blue tint of the broad roofs came from the bronze plates affixed to the tile. The windows were small, and many covered with bars. The doors weren't much bigger and invariably reinforced with bands of iron. The thoroughfares were dotted with "street castles." Like the bastions in the walls and ramparts, they provided shelter when youma appeared.

There were ten times as many watch towers as the typical city, equipped with bells to warn of an impending attack. Protecting against youma here was a natural part of daily life.

Shushou responded to Gankyuu's suggestion with a carefree smile. "Yes, living here would be tough. But I'm not worried."

"Where does such confidence come from?" asked the astounded Gankyuu.

Shushou answered without a second thought, "Because I have the divine protection of the Lord God Creator."

"Of course you do," Gankyuu said wearily.

He pulled on the haku's reins. Jammed up against the gate, the crowds came to a halt, like an army waiting for the drawbridge to lower so they could charge across. Watchfires burned brightly on the sentry posts. There were soldiers everywhere.

The crowded plaza notwithstanding, the mood was hushed. Only a low rustling and whispering could be heard. Even the cool dawn seemed tense, waiting in anticipation.

"It's so quiet—"

"That's normal. Because after this, there's only the Yellow Sea. Everybody knows that once you venture in, there's no leaving until the Summer Solstice."

"That's right," Shushou murmured.

Gankyuu urged her on. They wended their way through the crowds. At the south end of the plaza, next to the gate, was a shrine. Purple smoke hung in the gloomy gray air. People thronged around. Shushou had never seen such a shrine in Renshou.

The plaza wouldn't be there if the gate wasn't. The shrine seemed almost an appendage of the barrier wall, wider than it was tall and lined with dozens of votive candles.

Gankyuu faced the shrine, clapped his hands together, and prayed. Shushou couldn't help gaping at him. She looked closer at the shrine. None of the usual patriarchs were enshrined there. Only a single statue. She couldn't make it out in the shadows, except that the figure was wearing armor.

The figure was wrapped in a toga-like shawl, bringing to mind the statue of a fierce guardian angel she'd seen once in a temple. As she stood there eyeing it, Gankyuu pushed her head down in a bow.

"Hey!"

"Be polite and pay your respects. We are about to enter a world where humans do not belong."

In the Yellow Sea, beyond the Earth Gate, the rules and reasons of men did not apply. All they could do was petition divine beings like this guardian angel to watch over them.

Next to the altar was a bucket filled with water in which bundles of bare peach branches were soaking. Gankyuu pulled one out and sprinkled water over himself, Shushou and the haku, then thrust it into the saddle.

The rock wall next to the bucket was covered with small wooden talismans hanging from the crevices. Gankyuu draped one around Shushou's neck.

"What's this?"

"You might think yourself too good for one, but wear it for now."

Shushou picked up the card-sized piece of wood and examined it. "An amulet?"

"A Kenrou Shinkun talisman. It protects people traveling into the Yellow Sea."

Gankyuu selected two more pieces of the weathered wood for himself and the haku. The black ink was faded and worn. Travelers who returned safely from the Yellow Sea expressed their thanks by leaving the talisman here. An old talisman was one that had protected its wearer for a long time. Experienced hands always chose the old over the new.

Shushou looked back at the shrine. *That statue is supposed to be Kenrou Shinkun?* "Never heard of him."

"Don't be rude. He's the only person you can absolutely rely on in the Yellow Sea."

"Aren't there plenty of gods about?"

"The Yellow Sea is a place abandoned even by the gods. The only person who will come to save you is Shinkun."

"Huh," said Shushou.

Silence swept across the plaza, following by the low sound of a drum. The Earth Gate was about to open.

Chapter 11

[2-3] **T**he base of the Kongou Range that encircled the Yellow Sea was much broader than any of the other mountains whose summits jutted through the Sea of Clouds. The wide road cutting through the soaring wall of rock had to cover an equally long distance.

When the Earth Gate opened, the vast canyon threading beneath the canyon peaks—perched so close together at times they appeared to be sculpted out of stone—would continue on.

From the Earth Gate, the canyon walls gradually rose to the level of the cliffs. Winding and twisting along the bottom of the deep ravine, the road rose too, though the illusion presented to the eye was that of it sinking down into oblivion.

At six hundred yards wide, the canyon road could accommodate a line of mounted cavalry coming and going. With the soldiers bound for the fort at the lead, the people in the plaza hurried towards the Yellow Sea.

Wisps of clouds lingered here and there along the way and on the bare rock walls on either side. There was no wind and no warmth to disperse in any case.

The sun of the Spring Equinox was shadowed by the Kongou Mountains before them. The predawn darkness continued on and on. As the canyon deepened, stretching out like a winding river above them, the sky began to turn. The first faint rays of sunlight had barely brushed the ridgelines when the throngs striding along the valley floor in two and threes came to a halt and raised their voices.

An enormous gate blocked the way. It seemed to lean inwards, though that impression was due only to its overwhelming size.

The gate had two stories. The first was hewn from a uniform slab of rock. Tightly shut before them, the red lacquer doors set into the slab rose dozens of times higher than an ordinary person.

Atop the second story, vermillion columns roofed with green tile seemed to punch holes in the sky. There was a smaller gate in the center. It had no doors. Above this gate was a placard on which was written in black ink and gold leaf:

Reiken Gate

“That is—” Shushou said in a small voice. “That is a picture of a youma.”

The strange figure of a youma or a similar magical beast was engraved into the red doors of the gate. It had the body of a dragon and a great span of wings.

“That is the sacred beast that guards the Reiken Gate. Tenhaku.”

However high the Reiken Gate was, a humble pegasus could fly over it. Then there was that open gate in the second story, and the open sky above. But Tenhaku lived atop those soaring columns. Anyone who tried to enter the Yellow Sea in violation of the law would be struck down by lightning, their soul snatched and devoured.

Shushou listened to Gankyuu’s explanation as she solemnly strode forward, looking up at the huge gate. The rest of the people facing the Reiken Gate sank into a heavy silence. They came to a halt in front of the gate. The tension was palatable.

The terraced sentry posts chiseled into the ledges of the steep cliffs in front of the gates were unoccupied. The gates opened at noon. There was still time. The taut atmosphere filled the canyon.

A roar rang out from the tops of the tall columns, soft and low and yet shaking the depths of the air. The kind of sound that seemed to reverberate forever. Less a roar than a growl. People cast fearful glances around them. A fretful murmur shot through the crowd. The timber changed, the growl matching the murmur and continuing on.

“What—” Shushou said in a small voice.

“The voice of Tenhaku,” Gankyuu said. He pointed up at gate in the upper story. “It’s okay. Look.”

There was no breath of wind, no sign of an alighting bird on the towering red and green edifice. The last lingering echoes of Tenhaku’s roar and the rustling crowd faded away, leaving behind a grave stillness.

A human figure appeared on the impassable gate. Only a small shadow at first. It stood on the monolithic slab, then stepped casually into thin air. The shadow descended as if sinking through clear water. When it passed the midway point, the figure became recognizable as an old man.

There was nothing the slightest bit unusual about him. All eyes followed his descent as he landed on the ground at the foot of the red gate. This was Tenhaku in his transformed state, or so everybody said. The black steel shackles around his hands and feet said as much too.

Standing in front of the gate, he bowed to no one in particular, turned on his heels and placed his hands on the huge doors. The doors were forty times his height and two hundred yards wide. The weight was unimaginable. And yet they eased open with no obvious resistance.

A warm wind blew in, whipping up the hems of clothes and disheveling before it raced down the canyon. These were the winds of the Yellow Sea, that the people of Ken feared more than anything.

The old man's hands spread apart. The doors parted to reveal another crowd of people with a line of troops at the fore, a mirror image of the crowd on the other side, all holding their breath.

The old man walked forward, from inside the gate to the outside, the doors appearing to yield to the force of his hands as his arms reached out, until they gaped wide open.

The old man stopped. This time he faced the gate, bowed again, and disappeared into thin air. At the same time, a great shout of joy rang out.

The shout shook the canyon walls. The wind blew and howled. The soldiers poised at the gate broke into a run.

The cavalry outside the gate urged their mounts forward. Bows and spears in hand, they stormed down the canyon. Beyond the human tide, the stone formations of the barrier walls blocked the canyon like a dam.

At the same time, the soldiers inside the gate rushed past them, greetings and expressions of warm regard flashing back and forth. Since the Spring Equinox of the previous year, they had held down the fortress that sheltered those traveling from and back to Ken.

Departing after a one-year tour of duty, with a great cry of relief, they shot through the gate and, wielding their weapons, climbed the ledges to the sentry posts. From there they covered the retreat of the rear guard.

Kijuu skimmed past them. Taking the lead in their straightaway plunge into the Yellow Sea were the corpse hunters. They had until the following day at noon to scout the Yellow Sea and return. Their more stalwart companions followed at a more leisurely pace, planning on staying there until the Summer Solstice.

Then there were those who'd entered at the Winter Solstice and had made it safely to the spring.

Those going on the Shouzan and unaccustomed to life in the Yellow Sea watched in wonder as the scene unfolded before them. Confused by all the clamor, they mounted their rides and galloped through the gate, mingling with the thronging masses. Those on foot came to their senses and raced after them.

"Wow!" said Shushou, her own exclamations washed away by the tremendous tumult. She just barely heard Gankyuu's response.

"This is the *Day of Ankou,*" he said with a smile. His soul was steeped in the terrors of the Yellow Sea and yet he always found himself looking forward to this ritualistic Day of Ankou and the moment when one of the four gates opened.

"It really is an incredible sight."

"This is your last chance. Turn back now and you'll reach the Earth Gate before it closes.

Shushou glanced over her shoulder at him. Her voice rose crisply above the noise.

“No.”

“You’re really set on going?”

“I am going. Kyou needs an Empress.”

“In other words, you.”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Gankyuu looked into those unyielding eyes and sighed. He took up the reins, climbed into the saddle, and reached a hand down to her. “Up you go.”

Chapter 12

[2-4] **T**he haku set off on foot towards the fort.

Supplies had been ferried in every Spring Equinox for years upon years in order to build the fort, the first and last rest stop in the Yellow Sea. It was a short flight by air, but less-friendly winged creatures were already visible in the sky over the steep canyon walls.

These were youma sniffing out the spreading chaos and destruction in Kyou. Perhaps because they could not see into the depths of the canyons, few travelers fell victim to them here. Those lagging behind the main body had little to worry about.

Hurrying though the wide gates that spanned the road, they entered a stone tunnel. Faint light spilled through the widely-spaced windows. Holes cut into the stone and mortar ceiling and topped with small roofs served as chimneys. Iron railings planted around the perimeter of the roofs warded off youma.

Compared to the size of the tunnel, though, the lighting and ventilation was hardly enough. Above their heads, the earth rumbled to the sound of marching feet as the soldiers raced to their sentry posts.

On this day, here they must hold their ground, not yield an inch, and not allow the youma to pour through the Reiken Gate and over the walls of Ken. Long years of preparation had reinforced Ken’s defensive lines.

Even so, holding back the destruction in Ken, Kyou’s sole beachhead into the Yellow Sea, did not keep the youma from steadily invading Kyou. Nobody knew where the youma came from. They couldn’t fly over the Kongou Mountains and couldn’t pass through any of the Yellow Sea’s four gates except on one of those four days.

Nevertheless, when destruction visited a kingdom, so did youma.

Some said they knew secret tunnels through the Kongou Mountains that lead to

each kingdom's Ryou'un Mountain. Or the youma that spread wide and far retreated underground when a new emperor once again established peace and order. There they hibernated until they sniffed out ruin and decline and and flew forth like bats at sunset.

Every theory was just as likely—and unlikely—as the next.

"Ken is a city in a tough spot," Shushou said, perched on the back of the haku as it wended its way through the tunnel.

"The whole of Kyou is going to resemble Ken before long, except that few cities are as well protected."

"Why are there youma in the first place? If I was the Lord God Creator, I would exterminate all of them."

Gankyuu said with a wry smile, "So after the Imperial Throne, next comes the Throne of Heaven? You never know when to call it quits."

"Because nobody around here will step up and do what has to be done. It's up to me to come up with these solutions."

"Well, then you'd better make sure the Yellow Sea doesn't end up your graveyard."

"I am counting on you to watch out for me. That's what I hired you for."

There's no winning with this girl, Gankyuu sighed, staring up at the ceiling.

A light appeared ahead of them. Not from flickering torches but the unwavering light of the sun. The tunnel exited inside the fort. The interior of the fort resembled a small village, halfway between a castle and a town. Around Gankyuu, travelers let out sighs of relief or took sharp breaths in surprise and wonder.

"It's amazing to find a whole city here."

"Not big enough to call it a city."

The streets were narrow, barely wide enough to allow a pair of harnessed horses to pass. Both sides were neatly lined by low, stone structures. Like the tunnel, skylights were cut into the stone awnings above the roads. It wasn't dark, nor was it particularly bright.

The humid air stagnated. The aging stones soaked up the heat particular to the Yellow Sea. The atmosphere was hardly comfortable, but truth be told, this was the end of "civilization." Here a night's lodgings got the traveler a roof over his head and a dirt floor under his feet. But lodgings, at the very least. And a square meal, however roughly made.

The fort was originally built for the cavalry that protected Ken. Its benefits extended to ordinary travelers as well. Gankyuu and Shushou took advantage of those "benefits" too and spend a fitful night on a dirt floor.

Perhaps because she'd been kept awake the night before by the cries of the gathering youma, Shushou's face the next morning was a bit pallid. When Gankyuu suggested, last of all, that they visit a shrine, she went along out of curiosity. A crowd

also making their final petitions for a safe journey line wound in a long line around the shrine in the small town.

After a brief wait, Gankyuu and Shushou stood in front of the shrine. Not far from the shrine was a space just like the one in Ken, with people waiting there for the gates of the fort to open.

Among them, two of the travelers spotted them and with surprised looks pointed fingers and gestured. Another man worked his way through the crowd to get a better look at Shushou's face. Apparently, she was already a known presence in the fort.

"What's with the little kid?"

"They together? You gotta be kidding me."

"I don't believe it. She's returning to Ken by noon, right? Just on some sightseeing jaunt."

Shushou cast a scornful glance at the source of the loudly-whispered asides, turned back to the cavern-like shrine and bowed. Covering the kindly face and armored torso of Kenrou Shinkun, the guardian angel of those venturing into the Yellow Sea, were layers of scarf-like shawls.

"What are those shawls?" Shushou asked in a small voice.

"The stories say that Shinkun wore armor made from the hide of a youma called a *Ko,* and wove jewels into the scarves so he could present them to the youma."

"Youma and youjuu have a hankering for jewels? And by youjuu, we're talking about kijuu, right?"

"It'd be more accurate to say that there's a kijuu inside every youma. And inside every kijuu and youma is something that's intoxicated by jewels."

"Intoxicated? Like when people drink too much alcohol?"

"Something like that. I don't really know myself. But they get tipsy the same as us humans. So it probably is like getting drunk."

"How strange. Not the kind of thing you learn in school."

"I'm not surprised. Books could be written about what we *don't* know about youma and youjuu. Like the real difference between youma and youjuu. That's a head scratcher too."

Shushou' eyes opened a bit wider. She looked up at Gankyuu and said, "Youma attack people and youjuu don't. Right?"

"Well, that's what passes for common knowledge. Catch a youjuu unprepared and they'll attack you right back. Though they won't single out a person and track him down."

"You don't say—"

"Among corpse hunters, it's said that youma and youjuu started out the same. The different names simply apply to those that stalk human and those that don't. But that doesn't mean all youma especially hunt people. It's also said the difference is that you

can tame a youjuu but not a youma. But that doesn't mean all youjuu can be turned into kijuu. Others say that when a kingdom descends into chaos, youma are the ones that come out of the woodwork, not youjuu. Except it's not like youjuu *never* appear at times like that. What it comes down to is, you can't domesticate youma. I've heard tales of hunters trying to catch and tame harmless mushi, but they die soon after being trapped. And when they die, it's like they give off a signal and bigger ones come after them."

"I wonder why."

"Who knows? Youma that prowl around towns and cities don't die. So it's not like they're vulnerable to human civilization. And despite dying when trapped, they're still awfully hard to kill on purpose."

"Huh," Shushou muttered, trailing after Gankyuu as they left the shrine behind.

"Youma hunt humans. You really okay with that?"

"Aren't there any yaboku in the Yellow Sea?"

Any creature finding refuge beneath the yaboku tree, whose fruit gave rise to beasts and birds in the wild countryside, was safe from any predatory youma or youjuu.

"Nobody's ever seen a yaboku in the Yellow Sea. Then again, there aren't any normal beasts or birds in the Yellow Sea either. There are corpse hunters who've searched for the yaboku that give rise to youjuu, but no one's ever reported finding one."

"I see. If you could find a youjuu tree, you could pretty much dispense with hunting them."

"Same goes for youma. Find a yaboku and that'd make short work of it."

"Yeah," said Shushou. Put a fence around the yaboku and kill them as soon as they're born."

But then she grimaced. The riboku, whose fruit gave birth to children, and the yaboku were sacred trees. Any animal was safe beneath its branches. Not even a youma would attack anybody there. Such marvels demanded respect, it was said, and nobody should kill anything within view of one.

"Youma probably aren't ever little children. Ever heard of a baby youma?"

"They don't exist, or so people say."

"Really?"

Gankyuu nodded. "I've never seen one. And never heard of one being seen."

"That is strange."

"The trees they're born from; how long they live in the first place; why they're all males; how intelligent they are; whether they understand human speech; where they well up from in times of trouble; what scents or indicators bring them to the surface—we don't know the first thing about them. That ignorance makes it all the

harder to protect ourselves."

"Huh," Shushou muttered.

Just then, a cheerful voice rang out. "Oh, good. I see you've arrived safely."

Shushou turned back toward the wall of people. "You—"

Rikou waved from among the crowd of onlookers curiously regarding Shushou and Gankyuu.

Shushou ran over to him, her eyes wide. "What are you doing in a place like this?"

Rikou laughed. "Oh, I just had to find out whether you'd made it here in one piece. What happened to Hakuto?"

Shushou's head drooped. "After all the effort you went to securing me that certificate, he ended up getting stolen."

"Oh," Rikou said and gave Shushou a sympathetic pat on the back. "And still you made it all the way to Ken. I should have tagged along with you."

"That's okay. I really loved Hakuto and it hurt terribly to lose him. But this has got my dander up."

"But of course." Rikou smiled broadly.

Shushou said, "What are you doing here in the Yellow Sea?"

"I couldn't help wondering what kind of trouble you might be getting into on your own."

Shushou looked up at Rikou's grinning face. "Are you suggesting you want to come along?"

"You should have a bodyguard, no? You're a tough little girl, but hardly equipped to swing a sword and keep the youma at bay."

The smiling Rikou indicated the sword slung around his waist. Shushou smiled back. Gankyuu clapped his hands on her shoulders.

"Who's this?"

"Ah, he came to my rescue on my way to Ken. His name is Rikou. He says he wants to come with us."

"He what?"

"It must be my virtuous nature at work. Rikou, this is Gankyuu. I hired him as my bodyguard. Though I don't suppose one can have too many bodyguards."

"No, I don't suppose one can," Rikou said.

Gankyuu regarded the affable young man with a startled expression. Have you been chasing after her all the way here?"

"Wouldn't her welfare weigh on any man's mind? A little girl like Shushou alone in the vast Yellow Sea—"

"You knew she was coming here?"

"She said so herself."

Gankyuu barked into Rikou's bright face, "Then you should have stopped smirking

and stopped her!”

Rikou only grinned. “I can only imagine you said as much. And yet here she is.”

The quick comeback caught Gankyuu off guard. He stumbled for an answer. “I, ah, tried to stop her.” At a loss for words, Gankyuu scowled at the happy-go-lucky countenance in front of him.

“Gankyuu, there’s nothing to fight about,” Shushou looked up at Gankyuu with a complacent smile. “He’s a nice guy. A fellow bodyguard can keep you company.”

“You don’t have any desire to go back? We could make it back to Ken today.”

“No matter how many times you ask, the answer will always be the same. I hired you. You need to snap to it and start leading the way.”

However Shushou wished him to hurry up, the gates of the fort leading to the Yellow Sea took some time opening. A subdued aura emanated from the watchtowers above them. Voices urging the opening of the gates came from without. Finally the soldiers standing guard slid open the massive bolts.

Strong light poured in, accompanied by the fresh stink of blood and death. Shushou narrowed her eyes. The soldiers motioned them forward. Having hoisted up their traveling packs, the people waiting there timidly stepped through the gate.

Shushou and Gankyuu joined the line. Exiting the gate, the source of the smell was hard to miss, the corpses of dreadful-looking beasts piled up in corner of the large plaza outside the fort.

“Gankyuu—” Shushou said and pointed.

Gankyuu nodded. “Want to turn back?”

“That isn’t funny,” Shushou retorted, but couldn’t resist a glance over her shoulder, searching for Rikou in the crowd as he went to retrieve his kijuu. She spotted him soon enough. He saw her and waved back. The sight of that indomitable smile did make her feel a bit better right then.

The soldiers on the watchtowers atop the fort and on the nearby stone terraces scanned the heavens. Nothing was visible in the warm blue skies above.

Shushou sighed as she looked at the people crowded into the plaza. A rugged, bolder-strewn slope sharply descended from the plaza. Spreading out from its base, as far as the eye could see, was a broad expanse of green. The Yellow Sea.

Aside from the Kongou Mountains looming to their left and right, there was nothing particularly unique about the view.

“The Yellow Sea looks awfully normal to me,” said Shushou.

Overhearing her, Gankyuu said himself, “You don’t say.” He knew the Yellow Sea like the back of his hand. A corpse hunter who didn’t would soon become a dead corpse hunter.

Small bands separated from the throngs in the plaza twos and threes. These were the corpse hunters, committed to hunting the Yellow Sea until the next Day of Ankou.

About to follow them, stopping and casting bewildered glances at the prevaricating crowd behind them, were those setting off on the Shouzan. The entire group came to at least five hundred.

Many of those going on the Shouzan were accompanied by a group leader. It was not unusual to see travelers surrounded by a dozen bodyguards. Most carried weapons and not a few had horse-drawn wagons heavily laden with supplies. Of these, perhaps only eighty were actually going on the Shouzan.

Confirming this, Gankyuu breathed a sigh of relief. Twenty years ago, the kirin had stepped forward to select the next emperor or empress, and so the Shouzan had commenced. It was hardly surprising that the number of people making the attempt would have dwindled over those two decades.

Kyou's Day of Ankou notwithstanding, this could be called a good gathering. Relying on their good graces should significantly lessen the hardships of the journey.

In any case, these weren't the kind to whine that since saving *their* own skins was all that mattered, their escorts were there for *their* own good, and all the supplies were *theirs.* Even if they *thought* it, it wouldn't be in their natures to say it. After this, the heavens would test those dispositions.

Their bodyguards and their generous supplies would soon become necessary. There was a limit to how much a single haku could carry and the road was long. However they economized, they couldn't bring enough along to cover the entire distance. If any unforeseen incidents arose and they ran low, he'd have to light a fire under the haku's splendid walking skills and cover the remaining ground by air.

Youma, however, targeted fliers above all, making flying significantly more dangerous than proceeding along the ground.

"All right, then. We'd better get going," Gankyuu said when Rikou caught up with them. He took a look at Rikou's kijuu and his jaw dropped. "That's a suugu."

Rikou smiled. "Ah, so you have a fondness for kijuu too."

Shushou tugged at Rikou's sleeve. "Gankyuu is a corpse hunter."

"How about that!" Rikou said, sounding both surprised and impressed.

Gankyuu knelt down in front of the suugu. "This guy is really something. Do you catch him yourself?"

"Nothing of the sort. It was given to me."

"*Given* to you?" said the even more amazed Gankyuu. He glanced up at Rikou, who had imparted this information with hardly a second thought. If Gankyuu could capture a suugu and sell it, he'd never have to venture into the Yellow Sea again. "What I'd give to have such generous friends like that."

"I see you have a haku. You catch it yourself, Gankyuu-san?"

"Gankyuu is fine, without the *san.* The chap who can capture and bring a suugu to heel deserves a *san,* not a guy like me."

Shaking his head in disbelief, Gankyuu inspected the suugu. Even Gankyuu had rarely seen a suugu up close. He'd almost captured one once. But it was too fast and too strong and too smart to fall for the trap he'd laid. The very annoyed animal proceeded to maul three of his companions and ran off. He was only grateful afterwards that nobody got killed.

Suugu came in mostly-white and mostly-black . This one was more of the former, and with black stripes on a white coat, the more common. Either variety had the same swirl of color in their eyes and the same long tail.

The suugu looking back at Gankyuu showed neither an aroused mood nor irritation. Maybe a detached sense of superiority. The ferocity he had once witnessed was nowhere to be found. That such a beast could be so tamed was itself extraordinary.

Thoroughly fascinated, Gankyuu rose to his feet. Shushou said to him lightly, "I'm going to ride with Rikou. He says that Seisai won't mind."

"Yes, yes. A suugu's probably better than a haku, Miss. However—"

Shushou cocked her head to the side. "When did you turn stupid?"

"Come again?"

"Who say anything about that? We're not going on some sightseeing trip. This is the Yellow Sea, you know."

Gankyuu's eyes flashed. Rikou chortled with laughter.

"I don't weigh very much. Even so, a kijuu would feel the weight. I know that. But in a pinch, the question is which kijuu would feel it the least. *That's* what I was referring to."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Since my weight won't have any effect on Seisai, I'll ride him. Anyway, what is the name of your Haku?"

"It doesn't have a name," Gankyuu said gruffly.

"You should give it one."

"If you think it should have name, go ahead and give it one. But listen to what I have to say and don't interrupt this time. You must not leave the side of the kijuu, but don't ride them."

"Why not?"

"Because we will be accompanied by people on foot. The group will proceed no faster than a walking pace. There are tasks that can only be done while on foot. There is no taking it easy once you've entered the Yellow Sea."

"But—" Shushou started to say.

Gankyuu cut her off. "Be quiet and do as you're told."

Shushou glared at Gankyuu, a determined expression on her face. "Have you forgotten who hired you?"

“I haven’t forgotten. My job is to deliver you safely to Mt. Hou and return you to civilization.”

“This probably won’t be a round trip.”

“If you say so. I was hired as your bodyguard, but I don’t recall including my life in the bargain, not for such a paltry sum.” As Shushou silently sulked, Gankyuu turned his attention to Rikou. “Have you ever been to the Yellow Sea before?”

“Not once, alas.”

“Have you ever tangled with youma before?”

“That I’ve done on several occasions.”

Gankyuu let out a small sigh. In other words, he had two amateurs on his hands. Perhaps overhearing that sigh, Rikou added apologetically, “I’ll do as you ask. I intend to learn all I can about the Yellow Sea.”

“Count on my asking,” Gankyuu snapped back, albeit without much heart.

Starting with those closest to the descending slope, the crowds of people in the plaza began to break up. They at last began to move.

“Shushou, stay between the suugu and the haku. Let’s go.”

Chapter 13

[2-5] **T**he soldiers lining the plaza bid them a silent goodbye as they descended the rocky slope. The path threaded through the forest before them, wide enough for a single horse-drawn wagon. Following the valley stream down from the Kongou Mountains, the path had been cleared and trampled down by all those journeying on the Shouzan over these past many years.

Even though they were all headed to the Five Mountains, this wasn’t a particularly well-organized or coordinated pilgrimage. But going off alone was dangerous, so everybody stuck close to everybody else. Everybody sticking close to everybody else welded them into a single group, albeit for no other reason than simple common sense.

They left the rocky area behind and entered the forest. It was just past noon when they entered a meadow that served as a rest stop. Leaving the fort in the morning would bring them to similar places at the same approximate times.

The young trees and saplings had been hewn down, the process repeated over the centuries to form and preserve clearings like this. No sooner had they arrived but far

to their rear came the sound of the bell and drums.

They all started and looked back. Although obstructed by the sea of trees, behind them was the Reiken Gate. And now it was closing, and closing off any thought of retreat.

At that point, this person or that might have stopped in his tracks, as if overwhelmed by a sense of despondency, taken a breather, shaken it off, and gamely pressed on. They continued to descend though the rolling forested foothills.

During this time, the girl of barely twelve going on the Shouzan had already become a known item. No one held back from praising her pluck and courage in traveling all the way to the Yellow Sea.

"Kyou can't be all bad if there are still subjects like Shushou left in it."

"Adults could learn a thing or two from bravery like that. If every child and adult was like Shushou, there's no way the kingdom would go to ruin."

Some of the compliments were directed at Gankyuu and Rikou as well.

"Just the two of you guarding her all the way to Mt. Hou! Such chivalry is a rare thing to see these days."

Less bravery than pure recklessness, Gankyuu thought, and less chivalry than financial necessity. But he accepted the praise with thanks.

During the month and a half it would take crossing the Yellow Sea, the ad hoc groups they'd presently formed would, by necessity, organize themselves. Even the corpse hunters, normally a standoffish bunch, did the same when they entered the Yellow Sea.

Sooner or later a leader would emerge, so rubbing people the wrong way right from the start was not a good idea.

When the sun set, the youma grew more restless. About the time the sun touched the ridgelines of the Kongou Mountains, somebody chimed up that they should stop and make camp. That was when they came across a tamped-down clearing in a grassy meadow.

The line of travelers slowly came to a halt. With nobody in charge giving orders, they wouldn't stop until they collectively felt the need to stop. And so by the time the caravan broke for camp, the twilight was well upon them. While some hastily erected tents, those without immediately went searching for firewood.

Observing this activity out of the corner of his eyes, Gankyuu surveyed the forest and quickly settled on the best campsite. Venturing a little ways into the woods, he selected a tree and tied his haku to it.

"Gankyuu, there's nothing wrong with the field."

"There's plenty wrong. Shushou, pile rocks up here. Rikou, tie your suugu to the tree there."

His brusque tone made Shushou look at Rikou, but Rikou only calmly did as he

was told and tied Seisai to the indicated tree. Having no other choice at the moment, Shushou followed suit, searched for stones in the surrounding area and arranged them the way Gankyuu said.

"No sooner do we enter the Yellow Sea but he gets all high and mighty," she grumbled aloud.

Gankyuu ignored her. He enclosed the makeshift stone hearth on three sides with a screen fashioned from twigs and shoots pruned off the trees and lit a fire. On the way to the clearing, Gankyuu had instructed Shushou and Rikou to gather any dried branches they saw.

Once they'd collected enough, he had her mount up and bundle them with twines of tall grass. This would become regular practice. Waiting until the sun set gave them too little time. Wandering around in the dark and staring at her feet searching for firewood was a good way to invite an attack from a youma.

It proved an effective strategy, and they soon had dinner done with. By the time the rest of the company had pitched their tents and then, grumbling and complaining, got around to making dinner, Gankyuu, Shushou and Rikou had packed away the utensils, doused the fire, and bedded down between the two kijuu.

Shushou asked, "Is it really a good idea to put out the fire?"

Gankyuu nodded. "Yes. Once dinner's done, time for bed."

Rikou said, "And should we going to bed so soon?"

"Not a problem. If our lucks holds, we've got three days before any risk of attack."

"Why's that?"

"The proximity of the fort."

"But the soldiers *there* can't possible shoot at anything *here*."

"It doesn't matter if their arrows can reach us or not. The smell of blood can."

"Blood."

"Youma flock to the smell of blood. In the attack last night, youma and people died. The territory within a three day's march of a place where blood has been spilled should be safe. Any youma in the area will be drawn away by the blood in the air."

Gankyuu had the haku lay down and stretched out on the ground next to it. "Rikou, you use the suugu as your pillow. I've got the haku, and Shushou is in-between."

"The suugu would be fine by me."

"Do as you're told. If youma show up, they'll go for the kijuu first. The person sleeping next to them must awaken at the first sign of movement."

"I'd wake up."

"I'm not so sure," Gankyuu said with a kidding grin.

Shushou glared at him and drew the padded kimono around her shoulders. The Yellow Sea was warmer than Ken County. She didn't need the jacket during the day

but felt a sharp chill in the air at night.

"You don't have to be rude about it," Shushou sulked. "I would wake up right away. I'm not a baby."

She lay down and pulled the padded kimono over her head. People still bustled about in the clearing. Those gathered around the bonfire chatted in loud and lively tones, full of boastful bravado and giddiness from having ventured into the wilds of the Yellow Sea.

The bumpy earth beneath the grass made for an uncomfortable bed. Her legs ached. She'd rather have bedded down next to Seisai. The area was cramped. And Gankyuu was a nag. Sleep was pretty much out of the question.

But once she closed her eyes, when she opened them again, it was morning.

Chapter 14

[2-6] **T**hey were past the three-day window of safety Gankyuu had promised, but the Shouzan caravan was still deep in the forest. The mountain stream they were following had grown into a small river.

Just as they had so far, about the time the sun touched the Kongou Mountains in the west, the caravan reached an enlarged hollow in the woods and began setting up camp.

Shushou gathered firewood along the way as always, and placed the stones in the place Gankyuu picked out.

That day, Gankyuu chose to bed down in a grove a short ways from the clearing past a screen of overgrown shrubs and bushes. Behind a big tree covered with pungent leaves was a little meadow ringed by small trees. That was where Shushou built the hearth.

While Gankyuu cooked dinner, Shushou fetched water from the river. Coming and going people called out to her.

"Shushou, how are you feeling? You must be tired."

"Oh, I'm okay."

It'd be a lie to say she wasn't, but she'd been prepared for this kind of fatigue from the start. Rather, it was walking through the monotonous forest, however untamed, that was enervating.

"How's camp life treating you, Shushou?"

The question came from an old man by the name of Shitsu Kiwa. Kiwa had the most belongings and the biggest retinue in the caravan.

"Well enough, I guess."

"Why don't you spend the night in my tent? To think that a little girl like you has to sleep every night on the grass! It's such a sad sight."

"I can't say I'm not tempted." Shushou sighed. Kiwa's tent was large. Rumor had it he'd brought a portable bed with him, along with a horse-drawn coach and a wagon to carry it all. "But Gankyuu would chew my ear off."

Kiwa furrowed his brows. "What sort of fellow is this Gankyuu?"

"My bodyguard. I hired him. Didn't I tell you?"

"A *goushi*?"

"Seems he was once a corpse hunter. There's no doubting his knowledge of the Yellow Sea."

"A corpse hunter, eh? No wonder he's such an unsociable fellow."

"That I wouldn't disagree with."

The professional bodyguards who escorted people on the Shouzan were known as *goushi* or "guardians." Corpse hunters tracked and trapped youjuu in the Yellow Sea. Guardians were considered trustworthy assets on the journey. But everybody had to wonder what a corpse hunter was doing in the caravan.

"A corpse hunter is hardly a professional bodyguard, not to mention their reputation for outrageous and loutish behavior. Are you sure you'll be safe with him? You can travel with me, if you wish."

"Well, if he proves unreliable, I may take you up on that offer."

"You'd be more than welcome. Should anything bad happen, don't hesitate to speak up."

"Thank you."

Kiwa wasn't the only one making such offers. Her being a child was a big deal to everybody. She regretted having to turn them all down, but Gankyuu wouldn't allow it so that was that. Not that she couldn't imagine fleeing the nagging Gankyuu for a spacious, comfortable tent. But she'd spent all her money hiring him and it would pain her equally to see that investment go for naught.

Good grief, Shushou grumbled to herself after she left Kiwa and returned to their campsite. "But at least he seems a pleasant enough person."

Far from being a pleasant person, Gankyuu pitched a fit over every little thing. He gave her orders like a general bossing around a private. If she asked him a question, he groused. Maybe he was on edge because they were in the Yellow Sea. At any rate, if she'd only arrived in Ken earlier, she would have had time to find a *proper* bodyguard.

"That's probably no less naive a supposition," she reminded herself.

No matter how much money she offered, it was unlikely she would have found a

guardian who'd take seriously a twelve-year-old girl who wanted to travel across the Yellow Sea. In fact, she was here because of Gankyuu, and as long as he was around she was sure they'd manage to work something out.

Along the way, other groups called out to her. Giving them the same perfunctory answers, she couldn't help noticing that over the past two days or so, the mood of the caravan had changed.

Most of the caravan still gathered around a big bonfire in the center of the clearing. At some point, though, a growing number began spacing themselves out more, if not to the same extent as Gankyuu, than at least with the same general idea.

As dusk fell, they could be seen here and there around the grove of trees. They didn't have tents. Using ropes weighted with stones, they pulled down branches to use as shelters or as makeshift stockades surrounding the fire. They slept close to their kijuu and pack horses. They laid out their sleeping areas very much the same way as Gankyuu.

Wondering if these were the guardians, Shushou returned to the campsite with her bucket. Gankyuu was filling a bowl with steaming rice gruel.

This again. Shushou suppressed a groan. Gankyuu flavored the gruel with wild herbs plucked from their surroundings and shavings of dried meat, but it still had hardly any taste at all. She sensed no inclination on his part to change the recipe or the size of the servings.

"I'll be skin and bones by the time we reach Mt. Hou," she grumbled to herself. She said aloud, "I fetched the water."

Gankyuu raised his eyes, but no words of praise would be forthcoming, not even a gruff "Attagirl."

"Good job," said Rikou, though he wasn't the one who'd told her to. Shushou appreciated the thought anyway. Gankyuu's surly attitude since they'd entered the Yellow Sea was growing oppressive.

"You know, Shitsu-san said we could share his tent."

Gankyuu answer was as unadorned as usual. "No."

Rikou chuckled. He didn't know how to put on a grumpy face. "Are you tired, Shushou?"

"I'm not necessarily *tired.* We haven't traveled all that far."

"That's true."

"It's nice not being cold." She said to Gankyuu, "I heard the Yellow Sea is pretty warm."

Gankyuu nodded as he wiped out his bowl with a handful of grass. "For now."

"It gets colder?"

"It gets hotter. So, yeah, the Yellow Sea is pretty warm."

"Huh," said Shushou.

Gankyuu finished wiping out the bowl, added a little water from a leather canteen, swished it around, and emptied it on the dying fire. Shushou was taken aback by this crude housekeeping at first, but getting worked up over a little dirt here and there wouldn't accomplish anything. This was the Yellow Sea, after all.

"Hey, why do you have to put out the fire?"

"You scared of the dark?"

"Not at all."

"The smaller the fire the better. On a moonlit night like tonight, there's no need for any other illumination." Gankyuu glanced at the clearing. Shushou and Rikou did as well. The bonfire burned brightly and the people chattered on in equally bright voices.

"Why?"

"Because *they* are clever creatures. They know full well that where there's fire, there's people."

They, Shushou repeated to herself. *Youma,* he must mean. In that case— She glanced over her shoulder. "Shouldn't you tell them?"

"Don't go sticking your oar in. They're not interested in anything I have to say."

"How do you know if you don't try?"

"If something needs saying, one of the guardians will do his duty and say it. A corpse hunter has no business telling them how to do their jobs."

"But—"

"Quit complaining and finish eating and clean up and go to bed."

Chapter 15

[2-7] **A** cry awoke Shushou in the middle of the night.

At first she was sure she was dreaming, and it was her father doing the shouting. Shushou was inside her house, surrounded by lattice walls, staring at something in the middle of the shrubbery in the nearby garden.

Her father's shouts came from beyond the neatly tended grove. And screams. Her father was being attacked. *I have to go rescue him,* she thought, but no matter where she went in the house, more lattice walls surrounded her. She couldn't make her way outside.

I have to hurry, she fretted with growing impatience. There weren't any doors or exits. Even as she cursed the lattice walls, a part of her was grateful. Being unable to

run to the rescue meant she didn't have to watch her father die.

Shushou clawed at the latticework. She wanted to shout or weep but couldn't do either.

And then she awoke and knew it was a dream. She didn't have time to feel relieved. A moment later she realized something much worse was happening. When she opened her eyes and tried to bolt to her feet, she found her mouth covered and her arms pinned in a bear hug.

What—?

She didn't have to think about it long. The answer came in the form of loud and ragged voices. Luckily or not, pressed up against the suugu, moving her eyes back and forth, the only thing she could see was Rikou's face. He was holding her.

In the dark, she barely made out the tense expression on his face. And the drawn sword in his right hand. He stared intensely over her shoulder. She couldn't grasp what was going on, except for the shouts and screams of panicked and angry men.

She struggled fitfully to see more. Rikou said softly in her ear, "Calm down. Do you remember what Gankyuu told you to do?"

Shushou looked up and nodded.

Stay with the caravan, he'd told her. "No matter how welcoming it might appear, do not venture into the forest. If a shadow falls across your path, do not look at the sky. Duck beneath the nearest tree. When youma appear, hide under a tree or in the undergrowth, stay still and don't make a sound. Youma don't have great eyesight. Stick close to the trunk and the youma can't tell the difference between you and the tree. If it's an aromatic tree and you don't make any sudden moves, a youma is unlikely to ferret you out unless it gets close."

Shushou remembered well, except remembering didn't qualm the bone-shaking fear.

Screams and horses neighing, shouts about hunting something down. Whatever it was, she didn't know what was going on, and it was all the more frightening not being able to find out. She'd be better off asleep. If she was asleep, she could wake up and everything would be fine.

Pressing her cheek against the suugu, she fended off the impatience and anxiety. Seisai was so calm he might as well be sleeping, except for the rapid rise and fall of his chest. Seisai as well knew what to do in a situation like this.

Shushou shut her eyes and shrank in on herself. Finally cries of joy replaced the shouts and screams. Rikou's arms around her relaxed.

It's over. But what is over?

She tremulously opened her eyes and tried to look into the clearing over Rikou's shoulder. Gankyuu called out to them first.

"We're leaving! Hurry! Get going!"

Gankyuu shouted as he came running from the clearing. For some reason, he had a sharp, raw scent about him. The red glow of the bonfire lit up the clearing. It wasn't bright enough to make anything out, only people milling about in confusion.

"Gankyuu, what's going on?"

"I said to hurry!" Gankyuu barked.

He threw the saddle onto the haku and strapped on the travel bags—always packed and ready to go—and slung the leather satchels across his shoulders.

Before Rikou could follow suit, Gankyuu had torn off his poncho, bundled it up in his arms, and was astride the haku. A second later, Rikou and Shushou jumped onto Seisai's back.

"Let's go," Gankyuu said in a low voice, and the haku took off. Seisai needed no urging from Rikou to follow of his own accord.

"Out of the way!" Gankyuu shouted.

The people milling about in the clearing scattered in surprise. Fear showed on some faces, consternation on others. The rest were in a daze. Just beyond them was the silhouette of a bird the size of a small mountain. It had fallen to the earth and wasn't moving.

"Rikou, did something happen?" Shushou asked, clinging to his back.

Rikou glance back at her. In the moonlight she could make out his slightly rattled smile and that made her feel a little better. It was reassuring having a big-hearted man around.

"Yeah. Something."

"A youma?"

"Probably," he replied shortly, and turned to Gankyuu galloping along next to him. "We okay to be moving like this?"

Gankyuu nodded. At the same time, beyond a nearby grove of trees came a human shout. More mounted riders, their packs similarly secured, burst into the clearing. Confronted by the sight of this sudden stampede—two kijuu in front and the rest hot on their tails—the rest of the caravan gaped and ran about.

One called out to them, "Hey! Where are you going?"

The answer didn't come from Gankyuu, but from one of the riders bringing up the rear. "We're leaving. Once the smell of blood gets into the wind, *more* will be on the way."

The man's mouth dropped open. With a squeak of alarm, he tripped over himself scrambling toward his own travel bags.

Leaving the rest of the caravan in their wakes, the company of a dozen or so formed up and continued at a brisk pace down the road. Only when the light of the bonfire and the sound of human voices disappeared behind them did they slacken their pace. But they didn't stop riding.

“Gankyuu, is this okay? Are youma going to pounce from the shadows?” However Shushou steeled her nerves, she couldn’t suppress the quaver in her voice.

“We’ll be okay, Miss.” The answer didn’t come from Gankyuu, but from a rider who drew up beside the suugu. “They mark their territories and there’s usually no more than one. It’ll be a little while longer before the others flock in to fill the void.”

“Oh. Is that so?”

He nodded. He was a big man with a big sword strapped to his back. “More importantly, Miss. Who’s your *shushi*? This fellow here?”

“*Shushi*?”

Rikou spoke up. “Not me. The guy on the haku.”

“I see,” said the man. He wheeled his *rokushoku*—a kijuu that resembled a cross between a tiger and a horse—around the suugu and approached Gankyuu.

“Rikou, what’s a shushi?”

Rikou glanced back at Shushou. He brought Seisai to a halt. “You’d feel safer in front, wouldn’t you?

Sitting there pinned against Rikou’s back made her feel both uncomfortable and uneasy. So she immediately heaved herself out of the saddle and Rikou pulled her back up in front of him. Perched between Rikou’s arms as he held the reins gave her a clear view ahead and no worries about anything coming at her from behind.

“Shushi are corpse hunters,” Rikou said, slowing Seisai to a walk. “Guys like Gankyuu are called corpse hunters by outsiders, but they refer to themselves—people who regularly travel into the Yellow Sea—as *shushi*.”

“Gankyuu calls himself a corpse hunter.”

“Well, that’s Gankyuu for you. Hunters who don’t haul out a trophy but only their partner’s remains—you wouldn’t expect them to talk like that among themselves. It’s a term of ridicule, not how they address one of their own.”

“Huh.” Shushou looked at Gankyuu.

“There are shushi and goshi and *shumin*.”

“Shumin? Are they different from shushi?”

“You’ve seen traveling entertainers, Shushou. Do you know why they’re called *shusei*?”

“Well, um, I heard it’s because they carry red-colored passports.”

Rikou nodded, and Shushou continued.

“Entertainers, itinerants, and peddlers who travel through the various kingdoms with no fixed place of abode such as are known as *shumin* because of their red passports.”

“Well, back before that,” Rikou said with a smile. “If you lose your papers, you can report to the local government office and receive a temporary passport, right? A temporary passport is marked with a red stripe. Originally, temporary passport were

called *shusei.* Those issued shusei, who wandered from kingdom to kingdom with no permanent address, were also called shusei. In time, they came to be known as *shumin.*"

"Huh."

"Among these itinerants are the corpse hunters. As they are considered first among equals, they are called shushi. Men like Gankyuu who hunt in the Yellow Sea are the most respected of the shumin."

"Really? Then what about the goushi?"

"The guardians are also shumin. And though they travel in the Yellow Sea, they make a living hiring themselves out to people who aren't shumin. The shumin have more respect for the shushi than the goushi, whom they see as hired hands."

"So shushi rank higher than goushi."

"Shumin are also known as *koumin.* In general, they call themselves *koushu no tami,* meaning the people of the red and yellow. In spirit, they think of themselves as children of the Yellow Sea. It's said that a long time ago their passports were yellow. Since yellow is the color of the kirin, the practice might have ended out of respect. Or was simply banned."

"You don't say," Shushou mused.

That was when the voices of the people following behind finally caught up with them.

Chapter 16

[2-8] **W**hen a headcount was made that night, they'd lost three people. A *youchou* dove out of the sky and killed three of the men gathered around the campfire in the middle of the clearing.

At daybreak, the rest of the caravan nervously returned to the campsite. Most had dropped their belongings and bolted with only the clothes on their backs. They couldn't continue the journey without food and water and medicine, so had no choice but to retrace their steps.

There they found the remains of the three men and the youma, their corpses reduced to bits of bone and flesh. The youma they'd killed was a giant bird. Also scattered about were youma of various shapes and sizes, undoubtedly victims of the scramble over the carcasses.

The grotesque scene sent a shiver down their spines. They at last grasped the true nature of where they were.

The caravan again set forth. They had no means but to press forward. The only sanctuary in the Yellow Sea was on Mt. Hou. Anybody who decided to return to the fortress would have to wait a year for the Reiken Gate to open on the Spring Equinox, and nobody was so brave or so foolhardy to separate from the caravan and strike out on his own. Hiking overland to one of the other gates was equally out of the question.

There was nothing for them to do but soberly arrange their belongings and walk on, casting wary looks around them with every step, and cursing Gankyuu under their breaths for abandoning them without a second thought.

Taking the lead was Ren Chodai, a prosperous man who ran a business in the Kingdom of En.

"If he'd bothered to help those three, they might still be alive. Running away without a backwards glance, not even bothering to ascertain their condition—what sort of a man is that?"

Answering the question was the guardian on the rokushoku who'd spoken briefly to Shushou the night before. He went by the name of Kinhaku. The dozen or so that had fled a few steps ahead of the others were less an organized company than a group that traveled in the more or less the same place in the caravan.

Kinhaku said, "We knew what dangers awaited us if we remained. Our job is to protect those who pay us, not everybody else."

"Then why are we traveling together in this caravan all the way to Mt. Hou?"

"Cowards of a feather stick together," Kinhaku said with a ironic smile.

Chodai furrowed his brows. "If you're talking cowards, abandoning those unfortunate folks and running for the hills is a good description."

"I couldn't care less how you define the word. But I suppose, then, that you promptly rushed to their assistance and you stood your ground to the end?"

The blood rushed to Chodai's gaunt face.

"No? Another bit of tail wagging the dog."

"What did you say?"

Gankyuu walked alongside Shushou, the haku's reins in his hands. Observing the two enraged men, she reached over and tugged at his cloak. "Hey, do you think maybe we should stop? It looks like a fight is about to break out between those two."

"They're big boys," Gankyuu said over his shoulder. "Let them sort it out."

Twenty-seven years had passed since the abdication of the last empress. All those with egos and aspirations to greatness had long since given up on the Shouzan, having already determined that they'd never sit on the throne.

People going on the Shouzan these days weren't elbowing each other out of the way in a race to Mt. Hou. More likely they'd been encouraged by those impatient for the

new ruler to appear. These were less the heroic figures than generally decent individuals.

If not them, then those of even smaller stature who, observing these good people returning heartbroken from the Yellow Sea, resolved to make something of their own petty ambitions. With all due haste they reformed themselves and mended their relations with their fellow man and tried to convince the world of their newly found virtue.

Whichever camp Chodai belonged to, he wasn't the kind of man to abandon common sense for a pointless blood feud.

Shushou said, "Hey, Gankyuu."

"If you're going to ask what a dog's tail is, don't. When it come to trading insults, there's no end to the words we can come up with."

"Yeah, and I guess there's nothing to be done about *that* either," Shushou muttered. Gankyuu cast a sidelong glance at her and hiked up his brows. She said, "The fact is, we did run away. And to make matters worse, you knew that fires were dangerous and didn't tell them."

Gankyuu clucked to himself. He shook his head. "Like they would listen to anything I had to say."

"They would. Because you're a specialist about the Yellow Sea."

"I have to wonder. Even if they did, it'd turn into a real nuisance."

"Why?"

"Fires are dangerous. But at times they're necessary. So you tell them to not go around recklessly lighting fires. The next time a fire becomes necessary, count on them pitching a fit about the last time you told them not to. Amateurs who can't tell the difference have no business being in the Yellow Sea in the first place. You hired me, but not to clean up after every heedless idiot we meet along the way."

"And if your employer tells you to?"

"I refuse."

"Chicken."

"Now, now," interrupted Rikou. "That's enough."

"Are you taking this fraidy cat's side too?" Shushou said in a muffled voice.

Rikou answered quietly, "As far as Gankyuu is concerned, *we* are a couple of impetuous idiots who walked into the Yellow Sea without knowing a thing about it. We're likely to cause him no end of grief. So we should trust the one person who knows what he's talking about."

Shushou took in the vexed look on Rikou's face and sighed. "So it's all about bodyguards."

"Bodyguards?"

"That's what it's all about in the end. Those who have the resources to hire a

bodyguard survive. Those lacking the wisdom or the resources don't. Their fate is to be left by the wayside."

"Ah, yes." Rikou said with a tight smile. "That could be the case."

"In other words, those who enter the Yellow Sea without hiring a knowledgeable bodyguard have no one to blame but themselves. They're the bad apples"

"I wouldn't necessarily disagree with that either."

"But *that* and telling people that fires are dangerous are two separate things. Gankyuu could have helped those men if he wanted to. He didn't. As far as I'm concerned, the word *coward* isn't that far from the truth."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Rikou said with that same wry grin.

"It's okay. *I'll* tell everybody."

"Enough already!" Gankyuu growled.

Shushou glared at him. "Didn't you say you wouldn't speak up because they'd just ignore you? Well, I don't care if they do. So what's the harm?"

"Don't do anything stupid."

"What's stupid about it?"

Gankyuu looked at Shushou, his eyes briefly hard as cold steel. "That is information best kept among ourselves."

Shushou felt her cheeks flushing. "You mean, if everybody knew how to travel more safely they couldn't value their services so highly? Is that it?"

"I don't care what you think it means. Don't go around spreading bad advice."

"*I* shall do as I please."

"If you make big announcements and something happens, there's no telling how the guardians might make their displeasure known."

"Is that a threat?"

Gankyuu met Shushou's scowl with one no less pointed. "A warning."

"And I shall tell you this: you are a miserable excuse for a man."

"Am I?"

Gankyuu turned his eyes straight ahead. With a final sharp look, Shushou harrumphed and averted her gaze. She glanced up at Rikou. "A real coward. No two ways about it."

But she found no agreement and no humor in his face. He looked at her with a grave expression that raised a sudden qualm in her heart.

What? she started to say when Rikou muttered, "You are still young."

"Meaning? That I am a child is hardly a mystery to me either."

Rikou nodded and smiled. "Meaning this is something we should let Gankyuu handle."

Shushou puffed out her cheeks in a pout. "I get it, cowards sticking up for each other. You're probably dying to tell me how adults know stuff that only makes sense to

other adults too."

"What about it?"

"Sure. Fine. But keep this in mind: the throne does not distinguish between children and adults. When I become empress, don't think I'm going to forget any of this."

Part Three

Chapter 17

[3-1] **P**assing through the forest took another five days. During that time, two more members of the caravan died.

A wide and shallow river cut through the forest. A single chain stretched across the river to the opposite shore. Clinging to the chain, the river bottom slippery underfoot, they crossed the river and plunged back into the forest.

As before, the foot-worn trail ran alongside a valley stream. Their only recourse was to climb alongside it as well.

Day by day, the Kongou Mountains faded into the distance behind them. When the caravan entered a clearing to rest and make camp, the ridgelines of the Kongou Mountains were visible above the forest canopy. But they grew fainter and fainter day by day, slowly sinking down into the sea of trees.

The trail finally crossed a mountain. Coming down the other side, the Kongou Mountains were swallowed by the great expanse of green.

More fallen trees cluttered the forest floor, along with dying and withered ones. Before long, all they could see before them were trees piled atop each other like chopsticks, decaying and overgrown with moss, the whitened trunks poking out from among them like bleached bones.

Emerging from this dead forest, they found themselves on the banks of a eerily crystal clear lake. Within the lake was a long, stone-lined depression, submerged beneath the glass-like water.

Fifteen days had passed since they'd left the fortress. The number of fatalities had reached ten.

During that time, the caravan had worked out a system of sorts. Taking the point were the goushi and koushu like Gankyuu. Tagging along were Shitsu Kiwa and

others without guardians who, together with their entourages, had thrown in with the koushu. Plus those who similarly hoped to draw on the good graces of the goushi. Together, the lead group came to almost two hundred.

Following after them was an ensemble of around a hundred and fifty put together by Ren Chodai. Many of them made no effort to hide their contempt for Kiwa and the goushi.

The rest had the protection of their skilled retainers and were equipped accordingly. They didn't ally themselves with either camp, and traveled in the caravan wherever they could best fit in.

A rough form of leadership had formed among the twenty or so koushu, in the groups led by Kiwa and Chodai, and in the smaller, unaligned bands. Kiwa's and Chodai's entourages also included hangers-on who joined this or that group on a purely utilitarian basis. As a result, there was no end to the bickering and backbiting.

The koushu were hardly a model of organization. But they did understand what to do and what not to do. When something happened, they joined forces without anybody shouting out commands.

They quietly came together to clear fallen trees off the path, then separated and continued on without any ado. They selected similar ground for their campsites. At such times, Kiwa hurriedly ordered his people to rally around the koushu. Where they stopped, he pitched his tents nearby.

All the while, Chodai pretended they weren't even there or even searched out detours. He quite deliberately made camp as far away from them as was reasonably possible.

"It's weird," Shushou muttered.

They were clearing the dead leaves and grass out of a hollow in the pile of decaying trees on the banks of the lake. Leaning over to secure a tree with a length piece of rope, Rikou paused. "What is?"

"Shitsu-san and Ren-san. Especially Shitsu-san. He's an odd duck."

"How's that?" Rikou pushed aside a rotten trunk, drove a stake into the exposed ground, and fastened the other end of the rope to it.

"Look where he pitched his tent, next to these fallen trees like us. He apes everything we do."

"He probably thinks that is the safest course of action."

"Yeah, I get that. But Shitsu has an entourage of at least forty. With such a large group, mimicking the three of us doesn't make sense."

Shushou looked at the bustling Kiwa camp. She understood why Gankyuu picked this as their camp site. He always sought out sheltered locations where they could hide out of plain view. Except that hiding was out of the question with Kiwa and his

big crew stomping around.

"That is true."

"Why doesn't he simply ask Gankyuu or one of the guardians for an opinion on the matter? Something like, where's the best place for a big group like ours? As long Shitsu-san keeps on doing whatever he sees us doing, he's not going to ask what would be the best course for him."

"Would you ask, Shushou?"

"Of course. People who are experienced at doing things are bound to have the best answers. The koushu travel in small groups, but that doesn't mean they don't know anything about organizing big ones."

In fact, Shushou mused as she watched the dusk falling over the lake, Gankyuu told them the crystal clear water was poisonous. A mouthful wouldn't cause instant death, but human and animals shouldn't drink it. If Gankyuu hadn't said told her, she probably would have. And so would have Kiwa and company if they hadn't been listening in.

"Ren-san is strange too. I saw them on the shore debating whether or not to drink the water."

Rikou coiled up the excess rope and chuckled. "I'm not surprised."

"It seems they're always *discussing* things, like they're doing the opposite of us as a matter of course. I can understand him getting his back up because of his arguments with the goushi, but the goushi know the Yellow Sea a lot better than he does. I don't see the point of being so contrary."

"For what it's worth, neither do I."

"The one is just as annoyingly bullheaded as the other. Or is that the way all adults behave?"

"Probably."

Rikou fastened the coil of rope to the travel packs. The travel packs were always ready to be strapped to the backs of the kijuus on a moment's notice. Another one of those things Gankyuu never stopped harping on.

"I think it's wrong, Gankyuu and the others not telling people what they know. Treating information like it's some big secret is selfish and self-serving. I am totally against it."

Rikou got to his feet. Not addressing that statement he said, "Where'd Gankyuu head off to?"

"He went to talk to one of the guardians."

"What about?"

"Gankyuu is a hunter. That takes him away from the paths used on the Shouzan. He probably isn't familiar with the road ahead. So he's asking around. They're the ones who said we shouldn't drink the lake water."

Rikou smiled. “So that’s it.”

Shushou blinked. “What?”

“If you ask him, he’ll tell you. Same goes for the goushi. I’ve seen men approach a goushi on behalf of a provincial general from somewhere or another. Same kind of questions. Shitsu-san doesn’t ask and neither does Ren-san.”

“Yeah, that’s what it comes down to.”

“I don’t think Gankyuu likes keeping secrets. It’s more that he dislikes telling people things they clearly don’t want to know.”

“So he won’t tell you anything until you beg him to? How’s that any different from flaunting that you know it and they don’t?”

“Not quite the same thing, I don’t think.”

“I have to wonder.”

Kinhaku squatted in front of Gankyuu and traced a map in the dirt. “After three more days, we’ll descend through the forest and come out at the lowest place in elevation.”

Kinhaku was a sturdy man who rode a rokushaku and had long experience as a guardian. Due to his stalwart nature, he’d been named the nominal leader of the dozen or so other goushi.

“And then level ground?”

“A marsh. Because of the muddy ground, you should stay on your kijuu. Crossing the marsh will take a day. Fly as much as possible, just skimming the surface. The marshes are home to some vicious leeches.”

“Are they poisonous?”

“No, but they do like the taste of human blood.”

“How’s the visibility?”

“Poor. The place is thick with overgrown trees and rotten trunks and tall grass.”

Gankyuu nodded. “So proceeding during the day wouldn’t present a problem?”

“Perhaps not there. The tough going comes before. Nothing but fallen trees. No good hiding places. To make matters worse, with all the dead trees and rocks underfoot, you can easily lose your footing. If a flying youma swoops down out of the blue, you don’t stand a chance.”

“Water?”

“No good. After this, we can’t depend on wells and springs for potable water. We’ll have to use jug stones.”

Jug stones were native to the Yellow Sea, having been popularized by the koushu. Placed in a jar or canteen, jug stones purified contaminated water.

“So the hard part is getting to the marsh. Then the best time for crossing would be at night?”

“Not necessarily. In terms of the risk, it’s six of one, a half-dozen of the other. The bigger question is how those accompanying us will react, it being drummed into their heads so long that the nighttime is bloody dangerous. If they raise a stink about it, it’ll have to be daytime.”

“I figured as much.”

“You three have fast kijuu. You could make it to the marsh in a flash.”

“What about you?”

“We’ve got three people on foot and the master on a horse.” Kinhaku’s mouth twisted into a slight grimace. “I’m hoping for *them* to make an appearance tonight.”

“Yeah.”

Gankyuu was agreeing under his breath when Shushou called out. “Gankyuu, dinner’s ready.”

Gankyuu and Kinhaku started and glanced back over their shoulders. The girl peered down at them from a short ways off.

“I’m coming,” Gankyuu said, getting to his feet.

Squatted there on his haunches, Kinhaku chuckled. “That young lady of yours is holding up well.”

“Yeah, *well.*”

“The first time I saw her, I really had to wonder. But she’s got steel in her spine. There must be a lot to recommend about her.”

“Or so it would seem. Thing is, she’s as contrary as she is strong-willed.”

“So you’re saying she’s a handful.”

Gankyuu glanced up at Shushou, waiting for him at the top of the slope. “That little girl is clever as a fox. And that makes her one big pain in the ass.”

Chapter 18

[3-2] **Y**ouma attacked the campsites on the shores of the lake that very night.

Sensing Rikou and Gankyuu moving about, Shushou awoke from a light sleep. *I don’t believe it,* she thought. She hadn’t gotten up before the screams filled the air. Sheer amazement overshadowed the cold thrill of fear.

As before, no sooner had the cries turned to exultations but they’d packed their bags, leapt onto the kijuu, and bolted down the hill.

The rest having become accustomed to the routine, the number of people fleeing

the campsites had grown with each attack. They quietly ran away, descended the banks and quickly put distance between themselves and the shore.

Around dawn, those riding kijuu slowed their pace so the rest of the caravan could catch up. Having set off at the speed of a galloping horse, the wait gave them a bit of breather.

As he always did, Gankyuu sought out the right place to rest and secure his haku. He glanced over his shoulder. “We’ll take—” *a break here,* he was going to say, but instead found Shushou standing there glaring daggers at him.

“We need to talk,” she said.

“What about?”

“Let’s go someplace where there aren’t people around.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“No, I want you to come with. I don’t think even you’ll want anybody overhearing what I have to say.”

For a long moment, Gankyuu took in the sight of the enraged young woman standing there in the gray morning light.

“Fine.”

He untied the haku—still saddled with the travel packs attached—and climbed on. Then turned to Shushou and extended his hand. She quietly joined him.

“I’ll go too,” Rikou volunteered.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” Shushou said.

“Don’t misunderstand. I won’t interrupt. I promise to simply observe without saying a word.”

Without pausing for a yea or nay, Rikou mounted up. Shushou said nothing more. Gankyuu didn’t object either and urged the haku forward. The haku picked its way through the maze of fallen trees. A minute later, they reach a small hill overlooking the rest of the caravan, that had stopped halfway down the slope.

At the crest of the gently rising knoll was a overgrown grove of still-standing, still-green trees, old branches piled up around their trunks. Gankyuu stopped behind the grove. Rikou brought the suugu to a halt a few yards off. He sat on a fallen tree. The resting caravan was visible through the branches of the thick undergrowth.

Gankyuu sat down in the hollow formed by the dead tree. Shushou stood in front of him. With a glance at Rikou, Shushou drew in a deep breath and returned her gaze to Gankyuu, sitting there on a moss-covered stump.

“What were you and Kinhaku talking about last night?”

Opening the mouth of the leather satchel he was carrying, Gankyuu responded to the pointed question with a wan smile. “You made a point of calling me out about that? I’m sure you heard what we were talking about.”

“You were discussing how you’d like youma to show up.”

“Indeed we did,” said Gankyuu. He upended the satchel in front of the haku. A part of a feathered wing rolled onto the ground with a dull thud.

“Hold on. What’s that?”

“That is a piece of a youma.”

“What are you doing with it!”

Gankyuu looked back at her, the expression his face telling her that was a stupid question. As if waiting for a treat, the haku buried its snout in the carcass.

“The haku’s *eating* it? A youma?”

Gankyuu shrugged. “Kijuu don’t mind the flavor.” He sliced off a chunk of the wing with his sword and heaved it into the air. It traced a long arc and landed in front of Seisai.

Watching the kijuu eagerly devour it, Shushou shuddered. “Don’t make them eat weird stuff like that.”

“Even a kijuu will waste away if not fed regularly. Haku are omnivores. Suugu can get by on an agate diet, but they need meat. Their bodies won’t function properly without it.”

Shushou grimaced. She looked back and forth from the haku to the suugu, and with a single shake of her head turned her attention to Gankyuu.

“You hoped that youma would show up. And youma showed up. What is going on?”

“What’s going on is we got lucky,” Gankyuu said, wiping off the sword with a handful of grass.

Shushou balled her hands into fists. “You expect me to believe that was mere chance?”

“Well, it was, so what do you want me to say?”

“You’re lying. I don’t believe in coincidences, and certainly not when it comes to coincidences like *that.* Last night, you and Kinhaku were wishing for an attack. There’s no other way to interpret it. And an attack happened. An attack happened and people died—”

“You don’t know that anybody died.”

“That’s not the issue!” Shushou’s voice grew louder. “Why were you wishing for a youma attack? You hoped for them to show up, and they showed up. What’s that all about?”

Oh, good grief, Gankyuu’s sigh said. “I also said you were smart enough to be a little handful of trouble and a big pain in the ass.”

“Answer my question!” the girl looked up at him, all but ready to stamp her feet.

“Yeah, I wanted the youma to attack. The next three days down the slope from that lake will be dangerous going.”

“You’re telling me you wanted the scent of blood in the air?”

“That’s right. The next three days will be bad enough. This takes at least one worry

off the table."

Shushou fixed her eyes on him. "So you summoned them?"

Gankyuu shrugged. "Who knows? Kinhaku hoped they would show up, and I agreed. That's all we did."

"Then I'll ask it a different way: are there ways of summoning youma?"

"There are. Sacrificing a goat or horse or bird usually does it. But I'd hardly call that *summoning* them."

"You—you *beast*!" Letting her anger get the better of her, Shushou flung out her arms in a rage.

Gankyuu seized them easily. "I'll tell you this. *You* hired *me,* and told me to take you to Mt. Hou."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You being the one who hired me, and I being the one hired to protect you, the end result is no different than you protecting yourself."

Shushou gaped at him. "You must be joking!"

"Why? It is what it is. We're not here on *my* account, but *yours.* Try exercising that imaginative mind of yours before you go shooting off your mouth."

"I didn't—" Shushou wrenched her body, but couldn't tear her wrist free of Gankyuu's firm grasp. "Nobody here told you to do awful things like that!"

"That's what asking for safe passage means. A goushi protecting the person who commissioned him has to make maximum use of every resource, person or thing, at his disposal. There are no exceptions. *None.*"

"That can't be—"

Gankyuu released his hold. Abruptly finding herself yanking against nothing, Shushou fell on her behind. However she wanted to jump to her feet and fling herself at him, she didn't have the strength left in her legs.

"I never expected such despicable means."

"You think that is despicable? You are naive."

Gankyuu glanced up at Rikou, sitting on the broad bench of the fallen tree, arms folded across his chest, silently looking down at Gankyuu.

"The Yellow Sea is not a place where humans should be. Setting foot here was madness in the first place. You think killing every youma would be the end of it? *That's* the joke. Take that approach and your bodyguard, meaning *me,* would be dead on his feet in no time. Forget about me, there are youma out there that an armed regiment of twenty-five hundred men couldn't handle. And yet you tell me to put my own life on the line and protect you. Failing that, are you going to use me as a shield while you scamper to safety?"

Shushou was at a loss for words.

"Do you think that with a bodyguard close at hand, the youma will just give you a

pass? That's the kind of thinking that makes you a troublesome brat. This is youma territory. We're the ones who crossed the line onto *their* turf. They're going to come at us, no matter what. It's a month and a half to Mt. Hou. Did you think you'd be so lucky that none of them would run into you? How long did it take you to get here from Kyou? Was it smooth sailing the whole way?"

"That's a—"

"You couldn't get here from Kyou without having your kijuu stolen out from under you. Did you think there was no risk of having your life stolen out from under you after traveling for a month and a half in the Yellow Sea?"

"Just because—"

"How is using me as a shield any different from using *them* for the same ends? The moment you put your trust in others and stepped foot into the Yellow Sea, you chose to sacrifice them to ensure the safety of the journey for yourself."

"No! I didn't!"

"Unfortunately, safety and security come a bigger cost than money alone. Why do those going on the Shouzan travel in groups? A big crowd makes it dead simple for youma to sniff us out. They can spot us coming a mile away. And yet, instead of standing alone in a field, we'd rather be one among many. Why?"

"Stop it."

"Because your best odds of getting away are while the guy next to you is getting attacked."

Shushou bit her lip. It was the bitter truth.

"Not only people, but all living things that are powerless by themselves form groups and herds and schools. By dividing the risk among all of them, they ensure the greatest safety for the greatest number."

"This is a grotesque conversation."

"Grotesque? Don't pretend to be stupid. There's nothing grotesque about it. It is natural providence."

Providence, Shushou repeated to herself.

"By gathering ourselves together while traveling in the Yellow Sea, the risks are suffered by only a few of the total number. I could hardly guide five-hundred to Mt. Hou. Do you think a dozen goushi could do the job? All I can do is protect the person who hired me. As long as my employer remains unharmed, I have done my job. If some other poor chap dies, and his blood draws the youma away from me and mine, then I can only be grateful."

"Okay. Enough."

Shushou hugged her arms around her knees and hung her head. Gankyuu sighed. He looked up at Rikou sitting on the tree. He didn't say anything. Rikou didn't say anything, except for a nod. The setting moon floating eerily behind Rikou cast his

countenance into shadow, masking his expression.

"Shushou—"

"It's okay. I know how naive I am."

"Why did you come to the Yellow Sea?"

Shushou raised her head. She couldn't see Rikou's face, but from his tone of voice she could at least surmise he wasn't smiling.

"Have you forgotten why you are going to Mt. Hou?"

"I haven't forgotten. That's why—"

"In order for a dynasty to endure, to ensure public peace and order throughout the realm, a ruler must require that blood be shed. Even if the ruler does not shed that blood himself, when his subordinates do so on his behalf, the responsibility falls upon his shoulders. No matter how you define it, there never was such a thing as a bloodless reign."

Shushou looked back at him.

"You will shed the blood of others for your own good. That's what it means to sit upon the throne."

"I—" Shushou started to say. She cast her down her eyes. "Yes. Yes, that is probably quite true."

Chapter 19

[3-3] **S**hushou returned to the campsite, settled down in the hollow amidst the pile of fallen trees, and took a nap.

Gankyuu silently watched over her, scabbard in one hand. Rikou similarly remained in the saddle on the suugu's back. The sky was turning bright when Shushou slipped into a deep sleep.

That was when Gankyuu said to Rikou, "Mind if I ask you a question?"

"What?"

"Do you think she's going to become the next empress?"

Rikou tilted his head to the side and gazed up at the sky. "I wonder. To start with, there's this little matter of making it to Mt. Hou. She's got as much guts as any kid I've known, but no matter how you look at it, she's awfully small to be crossing the Yellow Sea."

"The way you were talking to her earlier, it sure sounded like you expected her to

become the next empress."

Rikou smiled. "You know, Gankyuu, if Shushou makes it to Mt. Hou, I do believe she will ascend the throne."

Gankyuu's eyes opened a notch wider. "How's that?"

Rikou chuckled, as unfazed as ever. "Figured it from the minute we first met."

Gankyuu sighed deeply. "What confidence. You and Shushou both. Where does such great faith in yourselves come from?"

"Hmm. Good question." The smile vanished from this face. "Call it the cumulative acts of Providence."

"The cumulative acts of Providence. Huh."

"That girl was in a bind. I was in a position to help her. Another person may not have. But it was the kind of whimsy that struck my fancy."

"I'm not surprised."

"Shushou met me and then met you. That's the kind of thing I'm talking about."

"I needed the money."

"You were made for each other: a shushi short on funds with an encyclopedic knowledge of the Yellow Sea, and Shushou in need of a bodyguard."

"Her kijuu was stolen."

"But not her life, and not the money to hire you. It's amazing enough that she made it all the way to the Kai Straits on a moukyoku."

You may have a point there, Gankyuu thought. He jested aloud, "Ah, so you sized up her talents and abilities and came here to protect the future empress. Quite the gallant knight."

"Less gallantry than the luck of the draw. I would caution you not to think of me in such chivalrous terms."

"Eh?"

"Anyway, did you really summon *them*?"

He didn't identify *them* but Gankyuu got the inference. "I have no idea. The conversation went down as Shushou says. The outcome was as I desired. Perhaps Kinhaku and the others did something."

"*Perhaps* or *probably*?"

"I can't say."

The circumstances hadn't been that pressing. Although Gankyuu welcomed a youma attack, he was no less surprised than the rest when one came.

"I see. So it wasn't something either of you was responsible for." Rikou said it aloud so Gankyuu didn't have to. "In that case, why not explain as much to Shushou? I dare say she came away concluding that you *had* intervened."

"She can believe what she wants to."

"You don't care what she thinks of you? A widely-shared attitude among koushu, it

seems."

Gankyuu responded with a thin smile. "You'll be back to calling us corpse hunters and dog's tails before long, so read it anyway you'd like. It won't change a thing in the long run."

"I suppose not."

Rikou didn't say anything more. Gankyuu got to his feet. With a little wave that said, *She's all yours for now,* he stepped over the rotting timbers. Wending his way through the maze of fallen trees, he circled around a small mountain of dead wood overgrown with moss, and came to the gathering of Kinhaku and the other guardians.

"Yo, there's the shushi master himself. What a lifesaver." One of the goushi raised his arm in a kind of salute. "I swear, that was some great timing."

"How many died?" Gankyuu asked.

Kinhaku said, "One person. Two horses. In all the confusion, they tore into the pack animals. We got lucky."

"So I take it that you didn't summon them. Figures."

Kinhaku raised his eyes and said drolly, "Meaning you didn't either."

Gankyuu sat down. One of the goushi handed him a bamboo canteen. He accepted it gratefully, took a sip, and passed it on.

"We've just been talking about how it was too bloody convenient to call it coincidence. So you must have summoned them. Not that that current state of affairs necessarily called for such measures. But it sure helps, no doubt about it."

"Damn right."

"Yeah," muttered a goushi. "We've got one with us." When Gankyuu glanced at him, he added with a wry smile, "This caravan's got a phoenix along for the ride."

When Gankyuu glanced back at Kinhaku, he nodded too. "Thirty casualties so far. That's low, and the victims are spacing themselves out quite nicely. The river we crossed a while back usually runs high and fast, with youma fish swimming the currents. A tough crossing. You can lose ten people in the process, easy. This time around, the water was practically stagnant."

"That's true," another chimed in. "This rotting forest is a helluva place when the rains come. The ground turns into quicksand and the trees come down like there's an army of lumberjacks at work. But we've barely suffered a drizzle since leaving the fort."

Kinhaku nodded again. "We're riding on the wings of the phoenix. None of this would be happening otherwise."

The journey that saw the selection of the next emperor saw far fewer hardships than normal. "Riding on the wings of the phoenix," the goushi called it. The person on the Shouzan destined to become the next emperor was called a "phoenix" or a "fledgling phoenix."

“Then who is this fledgling?” Gankyuu asked.

Kinhaku smiled. “The little girl who hired a shushi to be her goushi, of all things. Who else in this caravan has the chops to be the next ruler?”

“I’d hardly call my being hired the product of executive decision making.”

“Call it the workings of fate, then. Being able to work fate to your advantage is what makes or breaks any leader. Appearances and personality don’t mean a thing in the Yellow Sea. The strength of will and the good fortune to cast a net and reel in total strangers, to reel in an entire kingdom—that’s what it takes to be in charge of the whole shebang.”

“Well, keep such claptrap to yourselves, if you don’t mind. She’s got a big enough head already without anybody giving her any reasons to be an even bigger ass about it.”

“Call her the *provisional* empress, then. She sure is what a real one would be like.”

“Emperor or empress, nobody’s been chosen yet.” Gankyuu glanced down at his hand. He felt a numbing deep in the muscles. He’d forgotten to wash his hands after slicing apart the youma flesh earlier.

Kinhaku smiled. “Well, it’s good either way, as long as we bring back our employers with arms and legs intact. Otherwise a fat fifty percent of our fee goes poof.”

“If you die,” someone jested, “just leave half that fee to us and what comes with.”

A bubble of laughter welled up.

“Right back at you. To us, personally, it don’t much matter who the phoenix is. But when it comes to riding on the wings of the phoenix and the smooth sailing we’ve all been waiting for, it can’t help but matter.”

Kinhaku glanced at the faces of the men around him. “To be sure, the girl’s not necessarily the one. Keep a close eye those going on the Shouzan. Don’t drop that phoenix. Loose the fledgling and the bill for all this good fortune will come due in a flash.”

Chapter 20

[3-4] **D**escending the slope, the crumbling trees and loose stones made each step a precarious one. Reaching the bottom, the firmly-rooted vegetation grew taller. The leaves were streaked with strange bands of purple, the boughs twisted into curious shapes. But the muck and leaf litter underfoot firmed up.

The travelers breathed a collective sigh of relief.

They emerged from the forest. Now a marsh confronted them. Trees thick with lumpy leaves and bushes sporting needle-like branches dotted the landscape. The path detoured around the marsh at first, but then turned toward the shore and sank beneath the murky water. It surfaced again on the banks of the opposite shore that now looked quite far away.

Where the path submerged, at some point someone had laid down stepping stones, the centers hollowed out like a wagon furrow in a road. On the marshland beyond the opposite shore sat a small mountain of rocks and perhaps a pile of chopped-down trees, vestiges of abandoned efforts to complete the walkway.

Instead of firewood, that day the goushi had gathered stones along the way. Now they threw them into the marsh. Most sank into the mud and out of sight. But one managed to poke a corner above the surface of the water.

The intent, it seemed, was that if every person going on the Shouzan made a similar contribution, at some point a passable road would emerge.

Shushou tossed in her collection of pebbles. Kinhaku bound the legs of his employer's horse and those of his retinue with strips of cloth and secured them with thin leather straps. Shushou watched with mixed emotions, not sure whether or how much Kinhaku and Gankyuu deserved her loathing.

Kinhaku was protecting his employer. But if rendering that protection required beckoning youma and accepting the casualties that followed, wasn't that going too far? Based on the steps they were willing to take, the safety of anybody *but* their employers didn't factor into the equation.

And yet they're guarding people who are going to Mt. Hou.

If his employer knew what his goushi had done, he would surely be furious. Or maybe he'd shrug it off the way adults did, means justified by the ends.

"This stinks," Shushou said to herself. She really hated feeling this way. But the undeniable fact was she that she'd safely made it this far because of the goushi and koushu.

She still hadn't resolved this moral dilemma when Gankyuu called to her. They crossed the marsh a step ahead of the others and waited on the far shore for the rest to catch up.

Kinhaku finished his preparations and stepped into the marsh. Catching up with him from behind, Shitsu Kiwa and his party mimicked Kinhaku's movements. Kiwa's followers descended into the marsh. Clambering to the first stepping stone, one raised a scream.

Shushou glanced up at Gankyuu. "I don't believe it. There are youma in the marsh?"

There was a touch of the inquisitor in Shushou question. Gankyuu curtly

responded, “No.”

In fact, the bellowing man had scampered atop a tree trunk. Though clearly in pain, he was in no fear for his life. A moment later the horse behind him reared.

“There something in the water.”

“Leeches, it would appear.”

Shushou glared at him. “Another one of those things you knew and said nothing about?”

“There wouldn’t be a point.”

“What kind of person are you?”

“A little late to be asking questions like that. I suppose you want me to say something like: *There are leeches in the marsh. They bite. If you don’t wrap your legs with leather when you’re wading through the water, it’s gonna hurt.*”

“Yes.”

“How very kind of you. And all the people who didn’t happen to bring along the right kind of leather straps, what about them?”

“They, um—”

“Or you could just laugh at them: *We have kijuu, so it’s not a problem for us. Too bad for you.* Would that make you feel better?”

Shushou stared daggers at him but swallowed her anger. “Couldn’t you at least ferry across the people on foot with the haku and suugu?”

“Don’t spout nonsense. The last thing we want is all of them turning to us every time the going gets tough. That’s one habit easier to not make than to break. Push comes to shove, I’m taking just you and running away fast.”

“But—”

“What’s up?” said Kinhaku, climbing the bank from the marsh.

“The young lady thinks we should be rushing to everybody’s aid.”

“That’s crazy.”

Shushou let out a loud sigh. “Now that you mention it, *cooperation* is not a word found in your vocabulary.”

Kinhaku held his sides and laughed.

“What?”

“*Cooperation* is the kind of word incompetents toss around when they find themselves up the creek without a paddle. I understand the sentiment, Miss, but people who *can* helping out people who *can’t* does not, by itself, qualify as *cooperation.* The word you’re looking for in that case is *baggage.*”

Shushou fixed her glare on Kinhaku. “I see. How koushu think is becoming quite clear to me.”

They made camp that evening on the rise of a hill in one of the expected clearings.

The days had grown longer during the journey. Within the ever-present forest, it wasn't that noticeable. But after dinner, it was still light enough to walk around.

Even taking a casual stroll warmed up Shushou enough to roll up her sleeves.

She eventually headed over to where Shitsu Kiwa was preparing dinner. There was the wagon and carriage his retinue had struggled so valiantly to haul along, with the tent pitched off the back. The fire was smaller and much less noticeable. Kiwa had eventually taken to heart the example set by the koushu.

"Well, if it isn't Shushou!" The man himself called out to her. Kiwa was seated next to the fire. "Finally succumbed to the temptations of tent life?"

"Oh, no. Seems some of your attendants got hurt crossing the swamp."

"Yes, those strange leeches. The men on foot got bit all over." He added with a sigh, "And the horses too."

"Shitsu-san, why didn't you ask the goushi about the best way to cross the swamp?"

Kiwa blinked in surprise at the question. "I knew the goushi wrapped their legs with leather. We observed and copied what they did, but didn't have the same kind of leather straps on hand. We ended up with a few injuries as a result."

A smile rose to his round, full face. "Chodai and his group went off searching for a detour. They haven't arrived yet. For their own safety, I hope they make it before it gets too dark."

"If there was somebody here who knew more about the Yellow Sea than Gankyuu, I'd be asking him about the safest way to make the journey."

"They're not likely to tell you, these goushi."

"That's not necessarily the case. Gankyuu goes to them for advice all the time."

"Gankyuu is a corpse hunter. They're birds of a feather."

"That's not it. Really. Other people do the same thing, not just Gankyuu. Instead of just copying what they do, asking them straight out seems to me the fastest way to get the whole story. That way, everybody can travel as safely as possible."

Kiwa raised his ring-festooned hands. "Shushou, you see, I had one my stewards go around and make subtle inquiries. But the goushi's answers never got to the point. It might be better to simply hire one, even at this late date. But they are all committed to seeing their employers the rest of the way, and won't collect the balance of their fees if they don't. I've invited them over, their employers included, for dinner. Offered to share my tent. But even Gankyuu turns a deaf ear."

"That he does."

"I understand where the goushi are coming from. If everybody knew what they knew, the value of their services would go down. It wouldn't be good for business. I hate to say it, but if amateurs like us don't suffer a little now and then, the goushi will lose face in front of their employers. If going to Mt. Hou and coming back again was

that easy, they wouldn't be so eager to cough up the rest of their fees."

"That could have something to do with it."

"However sordid it may seem to you, Shushou, it's not personal. It's business."

Shushou pinched her brows and Kiwa continued. "That's why I didn't hire a goushi in the first place. Those going to the Yellow Sea for commercial reasons can stand to get their hands a little dirty. Nothing wrong with that. Like I said, it's business. Except that employing such measures to protect myself, I couldn't look Kyouki in the face when I arrived on Mt. Hou. That's why I choose to rely on myself as much as possible."

Kiwa smiled and asked if there was anything bothering her, if there was anything she needed. "Not at all," Shushou answered.

That was when word came that Ren Chodai had finally shown up. Shushou got to her feet, bid Kiwa goodnight, and went over to see for herself. Along the way, she spotted a group of goushi tussling with one of the travelers, but ignored them and instead looked for Chodai amongst the arrivals.

"Ren-san—"

A pinched expression on his face, Chodai was supervising as his attendants pitched the tent. He turned to the sound of her voice. Recognizing her his brow furrowed.

"What?" he said.

"Did you find a detour?"

"Well—" he prevaricated. But some of his retinue were holding their legs and moaning so clearly they hadn't fully skirted the swamp.

"The goushi know a lot about the Yellow Sea. Why not ask for their opinion?"

Chodai plainly scowled. "The Lord God Creator doesn't need people who can't take a simple journey without depending on strangers."

"But the Lord God Creator doesn't need people who are dead, either. You could ask the goushi for their travel tips, or at least observe them and do what they do. Couldn't you avoid the worse of the dangers that way? That's what Shitsu-san does. He's suffered fewer dead and injured than you as a result."

Chodai hiked up his eyebrows. "Are you saying that I don't measure up to Kiwa?"

"No—I—that's not what I meant."

"I am crossing the Yellow Sea by my own wits and reason. That's the best way I can prove my worthiness to be emperor."

"I see," Shushou muttered, and turned to leave. "While I understand such obstinacy, it's a pity your retinue has to suffer for it."

Shushou intended to beat a quick retreat. She felt her temper rising. Chodai was free to be as stubborn as the mood struck him, go searching for detours all day long. Except his attendants were the ones scouting out the unfamiliar terrain.

"The emperor has to be a heroic figure," Chodai voice chased after her, raw with

barely-constrained anger.

Shushou stopped and looked back at him.

"Isn't it the most preeminent of a kingdom's citizens who becomes emperor? What man who bends his knee to another could be considered preeminent?"

"My professor at school used to say that the man who cannot respect others will himself never be so respected."

"So you're saying to be like Kiwa and respect the goushi by copying what they do? If *respect* is what you mean, wouldn't the natural thing be to try and stand toe-to-toe with them? The goushi have a detailed knowledge of the Yellow Sea. Because it's their occupation. But if you respect the goushi, the proper response is to learn what it takes to cross the Yellow Sea like them. Not curry favor and ape what they do and lower yourself to the level of their underlings."

Shushou stared up at Chodai's thin face.

"I respect the goushi's knowledge of the Yellow Sea. But right now, where we are, they have no intention of rushing to the aid of those in harm's way. And I have no intention of begging for their help. Simply because they have a more thorough knowledge of the Yellow Sea in no way obliges them to take on the burdens of those less informed."

"I know. I know that very well."

"Why they cannot is understandable. Their job is to protect their employers. But it is true that travelers unaccustomed to the Yellow Sea require the assistance of those who know it well, like the goushi. If the goushi can't provide that knowledge, then I will. Alas, I do not know what they know. So I must learn through repeated trial and error."

"Would asking them be faster than trial and error?"

"When you were in school, did your professors only give you the answers to every question on the test?"

"Ah, um, no." Shushou sighed. With a wave of her hand she said, "Sorry for being a bee in your bonnet," and spun on her heels.

She hadn't gotten far before running into Rikou. "It's getting dark, Miss. Gankyuu is fit to be tied."

"Well, then we can apologize to him together," Shushou quipped. But as she fell in beside Rikou she let out a long breath.

"What's the matter?"

"It's just so very complicated, everything about all this."

Chapter 21

[3-5] **G**iven that the Yellow Sea was not a place made for human habitation, traveling there entailed certain hardships. This made perfect sense to Shushou. No proper roads, no inns, no shops. Youma roamed at will. Spending a single night in the Yellow Sea put the strongest man's life at risk.

"That's what I heard," Shushou said, leaning forward as she climbed the seemingly endless slope.

The fact was, there *were* roads in the Yellow Sea, like the one she was walking on right then.

"What's that?" Rikou said.

Shushou shrugged. "I heard there weren't any roads in the Yellow Sea. So I thought it'd been like entering uncharted wilderness. I once went to the mountains to gather chestnuts. We had to push through the undergrowth, clear branches out the way, grab onto the trunks of trees on the way up and cling to clumps of grass on the way down. I thought it'd be something like that. The biggest problem was losing your sense of direction. You had to find somebody who knew the mountains like the back of his hand and wheedle out of him the best way to figure out where you were and where you should be going."

"Oh, really?"

Rikou grinned at her. Shushou flashed him a wry smile in turn and sighed.

"But the Yellow Sea has roads. At least up to this point, it's not like I've been thinking about how much better things would be if there were a *real* highway. Much worse is walking and walking and never arriving anywhere like a city or town."

"How's that?"

"If you're walking on a *real* highway and get tired, you can look for the nearest town. Necessities can be picked up along the way. If you're hungry, you can buy something to eat. If you're thirsty, you can stop at a village and borrow of bucket of water from a well. But that's not what I'm talking about. On my way to Ken, I often slept in the crawl spaces of mausoleums. I thought that camping out in the Yellow Sea would be something like that. But the two have nothing in common. When you camp out along a highway, there's always a town nearby where you can stock up on supplies."

Shushou leaned over to pick up a promising piece of firewood.

Kinhaku said, half in surprise, half in jest, "A road isn't a flat strip of land that goes on and on. A road is the road *and* what surrounds it, where travelers harbor no fear of starving to death or dying of thirst, where they can rest when they get tired. By that definition, there definitely are no roads in the Yellow Sea."

For the past two days, Kinhaku and his companions had been here, there, and everywhere, and always in shouting distance. More than that, the groups with koushu guides had clearly begun to close ranks.

"You've got a lot of pluck. So that's the kind of thing you ponder while walking through the Yellow Sea?"

"Of course. How does one become a goushi or shushi?"

Kinhaku gave Shushou a startled look. "A strange thing to express an interest in. Thinking of becoming one when you grow up?"

Shushou said, giving Gankyuu a sharp, sidelong glance in the process, "Well, becoming empress takes precedence. But, sure. If being empress isn't in the cards then being a shushi doesn't sound half bad."

Kinhaku burst out laughing. Walking alongside Shushou, Rikou chortled as well.

"Go ahead and laugh. And then you can tell me that shushi are unique among the koushu and that just wanting to be one doesn't make it so."

Whenever Shushou said she wanted to become something, the grownups around her would smile and said exactly that.

"Adults always think of themselves first. Say you want to catch a lot of kijuu and become a stable master and they laugh and say you're being childish. They claim that *wanting something doesn't make it so.* But say you want to try for a government position that simply requires graduating from a university and they'll tell you that becoming a government official isn't something you should worry your little head about at *your* age. It really starts to gets on your nerves."

"That's not what I was going to say and not why I laughed," Kinhaku said with a smile and a wave of his hand. "It's just that weighing your options like that, *empress* on one hand and *shushi* on the other, caught me off guard. You like kijuu, Shushou?"

"I do. That's why a shushi or a wrangler would be a good profession. Truth is, training kijuu is something I'd like to try. But adults won't tell you how to become a wrangler. How do you?"

"First of all, your parents have to be itinerants."

"You mean it comes down to your parents?" Shushou glanced at the annoyed-looking Gankyuu, who nodded.

Kinhaku only chuckled. "Yeah, that's what it comes down to. Your parents become itinerants or refugees. In order to put food in their mouths, they sell their kid to the master of a goushi or shushi guild house. You apprentice as a kid and become a koushu as a adult."

"Buying and selling people is against the law."

"It's less a matter of buying and selling than struggling to get by and lacking the resources to raise a child. If you're a refugee, the orphanages won't take you in. So you find a person who will. What else can you do? The parents might even collect some

consolation money, if they're lucky. That's pretty much how the story goes."

"Is that how Gankyuu and Kinhaku became koushu?"

"Well."

"I see. So that's what gave you two such contrary personalities. Considering the lengths you went to become koushu, you should take pride in it."

Kinhaku again responded with a loud laugh. "Regardless of the lengths anybody goes to, I don't think anybody ever became a koushu because they wanted to."

"People do all sorts of things for all sorts of different reasons. What happens to the goushi when there's no longer a kirin on Mt. Hou? If I become empress, you'll be out of a job."

"When people stop going on the Shouzan, goushi don't waste time becoming shushi overnight. When the work dries up, they go into the Yellow Sea and hunt kijuu. Though they don't all do the job the same way."

"How's that?"

"Before I went into business for myself, my guild master had three of us about the same age working for him. We didn't work as guardians during our apprenticeship. We went kijuu hunting with the journeymen. Except we skirted the trail used on the Shouzan. In that we differed from regular shushi."

"Huh."

"Following the road there and back while hunting kijuu drilled the details of the journey into our heads. Even when there's no longer a kirin on Mt. Hou, they'll keep doing the same thing. You see, even if it's just the goushi, they'll stick to the routine or the road would soon disappear."

"The road would disappear?"

"It's there in the first place because people clear out the saplings and dead wood, cut the weeds. If nobody walked here, the Yellow Sea would soon swallow up any evidence it was ever there. That'd leave the goushi in a real fix. When the time came, they'd have to start all over from square one carving out a safe route."

Shushou nodded and glanced back over her shoulder, at the long column of people going on the Shouzan climbing the rising slope through the sea of trees.

"So this road was surveyed by the goushi."

"What do you think, Shushou? Maybe you'll grow up to be a guardian."

"If becoming empress doesn't work out, that wouldn't be a bad idea either. I think a life on the road would agree with me. Which isn't to say I find everything about the job appealing."

"Like what?"

"The way goushi do things may be the way they've always done them, but I don't always agree. Maybe they got abandoned by their families and that's why they became koushu, but it wouldn't hurt goushi and shushi to adjust their thinking about some

things."

"What a strange girl," Kinhaku laughed.

Gankyuu sighed. "Quit spouting nonsense and pick up the pace."

"And if I'm being totally serious?"

"Then quit thinking such serious nonsense. Try walking without making a fuss."

About what? Shushou was about to counter, when the goushi at the head of the line called back to them.

"Hey!"

Shushou raised her head. A tree had fallen over at the crest of a steep slope, blocking the path.

The people and kijuu would move it out of the way. It was a scene Shushou was used to by now. She felt the inevitable spark of irritation at this obstacle to their progress, and regretted the burden placed upon the kijuu and horses. But at the same time, observing them hard at work lifted her spirits.

Gankyuu, along with Kinhaku and the goushi, ran up the tree. Behind them, several people noticed what was happening and hurried back down the hill, probably to inform Shitsu Kiwa. Gankyuu and the others gestured at the tree and pointed at forest on the left as they discussed the situation. Looking more closely, Shushou could make out a narrow path winding through the woods.

"What are they talking about?" Shushou mostly asked herself.

Rikou cocked his head to the side. "No idea."

Gankyuu indicated the forest again, then looked up at the sky, his face clouded with concern. Shushou reflexively looked up as well. The sun was by now slanting toward the west. The time of day was closer to dusk than noon.

The ad hoc committee finally came to an agreement and Gankyuu returned.

"What's the matter?" Shushou asked.

Gankyuu took the reins of the haku and started toward "We're camping out here tonight."

"But it's still—" Shushou indicated the sky.

"The road ahead is impassable. We'll have to detour through the forest. Except there isn't a well-defined road. We'll camp here and forge a path first thing in the morning."

"Why? Can't you remove that tree the same way as all the other ones?"

"There's a youma up ahead. A big one."

"Eh?"

"That tree was left there by previous goushi. It's new. Probably this winter. Trees were felled from both the left and right."

Taking another look, the path was indeed blocked on both sides, the trunks not shattered or uprooted but showing the handiwork of axes.

“That’s the sign of a youma we can’t handle, the kind of youma that should be avoided rather than confronted.”

Chapter 22

[3-6] “**S**o the way ahead really is impassable.”

A flurry of activity erupted as a number of people, starting with Shitsu Kiwa, rushed forward. The koushu had already stepped away from the road and were setting up camp a little ways into the forest.

As usual, it was Kinhaku who nodded. “*Don’t even try*. That’s what those trees are saying. The kind of thing we’re not about to second guess.”

“But—”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” said Ren Chodai, stepping into the conversation. Shushou was a tad surprised to see Chodai asking a koushu for an opinion about anything.

“The signal left by our colleagues is clear. We’ll leave the road and detour through the forest.”

“How long will this take? How safe is it?”

“Safer than going straight. Maintaining a brisk pace, we should be through this part of the forest in a day. It’ll be rough going until we get back to the road. I expect they also left a sign telling us where the detour ends.”

“Any chance of us getting lost in all this wilderness?”

“I can’t say there isn’t. So we’ll take all the necessary preparations.”

“Meaning this youma or whatever is the kind of adversary that makes the risk worth it.”

“We don’t actually know what’s out there, except it’s enough of a threat that the road was blocked to keep us out of its territory.”

“I see.”

“There is one additional request I’d like to make.”

Chodai raised his brows. “What’s that?”

“Ask those traveling with your party to take cover in the forest too. Don’t light any fires tonight and especially don’t cook any fish or meat. Definitely don’t slaughter any fowl or sheep. If possible, eat stale rice and make as little sound as possible. Space yourselves out of earshot of each other. Even then, you can’t be too careful.”

Chodai didn't look happy with these conditions but nodded. "I can't promise anything but I'll take it under advisement." He turned on his heels, walked back to the road and down the hill.

Watching him leave, Shitsu Kiwa sniffed before facing Kinhaku with a bright smile. "You goushi really came to the rescue there. Lying low and keeping things quiet tonight should stave off an attack?"

"There's no guarantee." Kinhaku answered bluntly. "Those trees were probably felled this winter and in a hurry. There's no guarantee the youma in question hasn't moved on in search of prey, or isn't still in the vicinity and waiting ahead of us. Meaning tonight you'll want to post guards and stay on your toes."

Kiwa reacted with a brief but anxious expression before nodding gravely. "Forging a path through this forest won't allow for a horse-drawn wagon."

Kinhaku shook his head. "You could transfer everything to handcarts and have your people pushing and pulling. Better yet, abandon the wagon and carts and divide the packs among your retinue and horses. Hand out what you can't carry to the rest of the company."

"Y-you can't be serious!"

"Did you really think you'd be able to drive that wagon all the way to Mt. Hou? The going will soon get much worse than this. Even if you kept to the road, you'd be shedding baggage before long."

"But—"

"You'll want to quietly start making satchels, slings, backpacks and the like. If you don't have the material, tear up the tents and wagon covers. The most valuable things you'll be carrying are water and food. And when you can't carry all of *that,* water's more important than food."

"How much water?"

Kinhaku clucked to himself. "I wish I knew. We're pretty much in the dark too. I can't say how long the detour will take us or where we'll end up. But run out of water and you might as well start digging your own grave."

"What about sending out scouts?"

"If you think it'd help, don't let me stop you. But that's not something we do."

Kiwa trudged away in befuddled silence. Kinhaku and the goushi turned to their employers. They were joined by Shushou, Gankyuu and Rikou. "The situation ahead is as I said it was. We don't know how things will turn out after this. I'm sorry, but for the next while you'll have to bear up with whatever hardships come our way."

Kinhaku's employer, a kindly old man, silently nodded, evidence of his unshakable trust in him. Others expressed their reservations more vocally, but reassurances by their goushi seemed to qualm their fears and bring them into accord.

Of course, Shushou thought to herself. That was the difference between Kiwa and

them, between the employer and employee. A goushi's employer started out with the belief he couldn't cross the Yellow Sea by himself. So he sought out a man he could entrust his life to and brought him along. It followed that every step along the way he would continue to trust the word of the man who held his life in his hands.

Shushou said quietly to Gankyuu, "No sense in putting yourself out for somebody who doesn't already trust you. Is that it?"

"What?"

"The reason you're so cool to the concerns of others. It's tough going out of your way for people who don't trust you in the first place."

Shushou believed that Kinhaku was a fundamentally good person at heart. And though there was plenty to dislike about Gankyuu, she couldn't consider him a hateful person. He'd brought Shushou this far in the Yellow Sea and looked after her like an overprotective parent. What she simply couldn't abide was this need to remain coldly indifferent to everybody else.

She savored a small feeling of satisfaction, sure she'd chanced upon the key to his personality.

But Gankyuu's response was anything but complimentary. "What kind of a fool are you?"

This time, it was Shushou's turn to stand there in open-mouth surprise. "What do you mean by that?" she fumed.

Sparing her only an exasperated expression, Gankyuu strode over to Kinhaku to further discuss the particulars of this or that.

"And after coming up with an explanation that gave him every benefit of the doubt," Shushou sulked.

Rikou tapped her on the shoulder and said with that distracted smile that never left his face, "C'mon. Sit down. Now's not the time to be throwing sand in the gears. We're the dead weight in a place like this."

"But I'm right, aren't I?"

Rikou smiled. "While laudable, your thoughts about the goushi that led you to that answer are meaningless here."

"Why do you say that?"

"You're a smart kid, Shushou. For whatever reason, you have a high opinion of Gankyuu. Therefore you wish to believe he's a good person at heart. Am I wrong?"

Shushou nodded reluctantly. She sat down dejectedly next to Seisai and leaned back against his by now filthy-looking coat. "There could be something to that."

"But I'm pretty sure what you consider a *good person* and what Gankyuu considers a *good person* are not at all the same. Gankyuu has his own expectations and logic. Whatever conclusions you come to based on *your* expectations and logic are besides the point."

“I don’t understand what you’re getting at.”

“You like kijuu, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“So you’d like to be a wrangler or a shushi. Becoming one of the *koushu no tami* appeals to you.”

“To tell the truth, it does.”

“Thought so.” Rikou nodded and grinned. “But do you comprehend what being a koushu is all about?”

Shushou looked up at Rikou. “What *what* is all about?”

Behind her, Gankyuu sighed. “On that subject, even a man who freely buys and trades suugu is unlikely to have opinion worth listening to.”

“That’s harsh.”

“And true. I can’t imagine that a man who wears silk while riding a suugu into the Yellow Sea is going to know a damned bit more about the koushu.”

“I wouldn’t say you were wrong.”

Shushou took in Rikou’s wry smile and Gankyuu sullen expression and clenched her hands. “So you’re saying there is no way *I* could possibly understand?”

Gankyuu bobbed his head as if this were the most obvious thing in all the world. “You’ve never been a refugee or itinerant, have you?”

“No. And *you’d* have to be a fool not to know the answer to *that* question.”

Gankyuu smiled at the pale, shaking girl. “I also know how bright you are.”

“That’s right.” Shushou said with unmasked pride, “I am Banko’s daughter. I just wasn’t the first in my class, I was the smartest in the whole school. *I’m* not the one with the comprehension problem. It’s *you.*”

“Anybody who would say something like that will never understand the life of the koushu.”

“What *I* don’t understand is why you’ve never tried to be a better or smarter person than a dog’s tail.”

“A what?” Leaning back against the trunk of a tree, Gankyuu reflexively straightened.

Shushou got to her feet and observed him coolly. “The sixty-five ryou I gave you is yours to keep. Thanks for all you’ve done up till now. And goodbye.”

Chapter 23

[3-7] “**H**ello there, Miss.”

Ren Chodai glanced over his shoulder at Shushou. He and several of his party were sitting in a circle beneath a tree. They were clearly in a churlish mood.

“Was there something you wished to discuss?”

Shushou said, “I came to ask you for a favor.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve had enough of shushi. I was wondering if you could hire me, doing chores and whatever.”

Chodai blinked several times. “*Hire* you?”

“Yes. You’ve seen enough of me to know that I’m in good physical condition. There’s nothing wrong with my legs. I can put in a full day’s work. What do you say? I don’t care how menial the tasks are.”

Chodai exchanged looks with the men gathered there then gestured to her. “Nothing personal, see, but I think it best you go back to the shushi.”

“I think not. I can’t abide the way shushi and goushi do things.”

“The way they *do* things?”

“That’s right. I’m not going into specifics. Frankly, I don’t even want to think about it.”

Chodai thin face clouded over. “Miss—Shushou, was it?—if you insisted, I would have no problem treating you as a guest. Unfortunately, as you have pointed out yourself, I am a novice when it comes to the Yellow Sea.”

“No matter how much a person knows about the Yellow Sea, if that knowledge is in the service of a twisted heart, then it doesn’t mean a thing.”

“A twisted heart.”

Shushou stared at the ground, her hands still clenched in anger. “Koushu are itinerants. It’s a tough life, I know, without a family or emperor to protect them.” She raised her gaze. “But it’s not like *I* don’t have any idea how tough life can be. It’s tough living without an emperor. It’s tough having youma coming out of the woodwork. Why else would all these people put their lives on the line to travel to Mt. Hou?”

Chodai quietly looked back at her.

“Yes, itinerants and refugees have a hard life. Supposedly it’s not possible for people like you and me to understand what that’s like. If that was true, nobody would ever venture into the Yellow Sea. It’s the koushu who don’t get it. It’s obvious to anybody who gives it a few minutes of thought that the koushu got dealt a bad hand in life. But that’s no excuse to beweep their outcast state, curse their fate, and envy those better off than them. And then when they’re in a place they know like the backs of their hands, lord it over everybody else.”

“Shushou—?”

“No matter how familiar they may be with the Yellow Sea, if they’re going to use that knowledge as some sort of retribution, they’d be better off as ignorant as the rest of us. That’s all I’m going to say. I am indebted to them for bringing me this far.”

“I see,” Chodai said with a thoughtful nod.

“I just don’t want to be around them right now. At any rate, Ren-san, you’re going to keep following the road, aren’t you?”

Chodai shook his head. “No. This once we will probably heed the advice of the goushi and follow them.”

“Why? Up to now—”

“Because this turned out to be the kind of thing the goushi said they wanted us to know.”

“The goushi sent you a message?”

Meaning that, amazingly enough, Chodai had spoken with the goushi of his own volition.

“The goushi went out of their way to inform us. That means something really dangerous must lie ahead. I am not so reckless as to want to see for myself. I wasn’t ever interested in seeking out alternate routes simply in order to defy the goushi.”

“But—”

“I detoured around the marsh because I knew there was something in it worth avoiding. The goushi obviously knew about it and took measures not available to us. If the goushi would go to such lengths, we reasoned that it shouldn’t be crossed at all. Don’t you think?”

“That does make sense.”

“We looked for a way around, again, not because we wished to defy the goushi. So if the goushi say the way ahead is impassable, we’ll listen to what they have to say. Seeing as they’re going to the trouble of carving out a new route, we might as well follow them.”

“I see.”

“Though Kiwa and his group seemed to have pushed the trees aside and proceeded along the road.”

Shushou started, her eyes wide. “Shitsu-san did what? Really?”

“You okay with this?” Rikou asked Gankyuu.

Gankyuu rose to his feet to run after Shushou then stopped in his tracks, searching out the place he’d last seen her with his eyes only.

“Let her do what she wants. She paid me up front anyway.” But there was little sense of triumph in his words.

“Huh.”

“For the life of me, I can’t understand how that girl thinks.”

“Really?” said Rikou.

Gankyuu glanced back at him. “So you say. Aren’t you the one who came all this way in order to escort that handful of trouble to her destination?”

“That I did.”

“In which case, you go,” Gankyuu said, and sat down on the spot.

Rikou grinned. “Don’t be mean. Putting distance between yourself and a koushu in the Yellow Sea is dangerous to your health.”

“Maybe.”

An unfathomable smile rose to Rikou’s face. “Even I hold my own life dear. It’s not something, alas, I wish to cast aside on behalf of somebody else.”

“Then why did you come all the way to the Yellow Sea?”

“I believed my presence might prove necessary. Though I suspect it no longer is.”

Gankyuu cocked his head to the side. “I don’t get that at all.”

“Chasing after Shushou would be easy enough. But without you there, it’d be an empty gesture.”

Gankyuu raised his head. *Meaning what?* the expression on his face said.

“Shushou probably ended up with Chodai or Kiwa. She’s not so foolish to believe she could navigate the Yellow Sea by herself. I don’t think she will reach Mt. Hou without a koushu by her side.”

“I see,” said Gankyuu, his mouth twisting into a frown. “There’s no need to guard Shushou if she’s not going to become empress.”

“If Shushou doesn’t become empress, I’ve got no reason to be here.”

When Shushou told Rikou she was going to Mt. Hou, the feeling she was destined to become empress took root inside him. He hadn’t ended up in that town with any thought of meeting her or anybody like her. For whatever reason, that was where he’d decided to stop for the night. For whatever reason, he’d circled around the town to check out the cemetery. And then for whatever reason, he’d left Seisai alone for a few minutes.

Gankyuu said, as if privy to these thoughts, “I think, in general, that’s what one person chancing across another is all about.”

“Though I don’t think it was so important *who* Shushou met. Had it been somebody other than me, that connection would have become equally important.”

“I suppose there must be others around as whimsical as you.”

“But if *you* weren’t there, Gankyuu, it’s hard to imagine how things would have turned out.” Gankyuu stared back at him. Rikou smiled. “You’re a koushu, quite out of my class. I expect you’re going to have a hard time grasping where guys like me are coming from too.”

Gankyuu chuckled. “Huh. You really think so?”

Rikou smiled again. “That is the response of a person refusing the possibility of

comprehension. Sans explanations, there's no way to say whether you understand or not."

"You're saying I'm narrow-minded."

"I wouldn't go that far. Koushu empathize with the feelings of other koushu. That's no less true for everybody else. As a general rule, if it didn't happen to you, you're not going to get it. At the same time, though, there are also those words that reject comprehension while casting aspersions on those who don't understand."

Gankyuu sank into silence.

"Shushou wants to understand *you.*"

"I don't think she ever will."

"And you couldn't be bothered to offer an explanation?"

"That's not what I mean."

"Or perhaps you didn't want her to *get* you from the start. Or feared her not getting you even after the explanation."

Gankyuu sighed. "That's not it."

"Hmm?"

"What I don't get is all these people who think a king is important to a kingdom and want one so bad they're willing to go on the Shouzan."

Rikou nodded and said with a wry smile. "That could indeed stand in the way of a mutual understanding."

Gankyuu had no more to add. Rikou kept any further thoughts to himself. No fires burned in the scattered campsites. The people scattered here and there wrapped the dark and quiet around them like a heavy quilt and stayed up through the night.

At the break of dawn, after the skies had brightened sufficiently, the koushu came to their feet and made ready to travel. Sullenly and silently, Gankyuu did the same, strapping the packs to the back of his haku. That was when Kinhaku approached him.

"Gankyuu—"

Gankyuu looked up to see Chodai at Kinhaku's shoulder.

"Shushou—"

"The little brat's not here. She dismissed me, don't you know."

"I know," Chodai interrupted. "She left with Kiwa."

"Figures."

"Last night, Kiwa cleared the trees out of the way and continued along the road."

Gankyuu shot Chodai a startled look. Chodai nodded. Kinhaku frowned.

"It seems that old rich man couldn't bear to part with his wagon. He set out at daybreak. He can go wherever he feels like, except the girl went with him. You okay with that?

"She could say she was throwing her life away and I'd tell her to get on with it. I'm

no longer in her employ. She's got nothing to do with me."

Part Four

Chapter 24

[4-1] **S**hushou grumbled aloud, "To start with, he kept insisting that I just wouldn't understand. I can't stand being treated like a little idiot."

Kiwa responded with an exaggerated nod. "That certainly is an unbecoming attitude. You are anything but an ordinary child, Shushou. Ordinary children certainly do not go on the Shouzan."

"Uh-huh."

"Well, that's corpse hunters for you. In a word, cynics. They claim to be koushu as their birthright but some of them were born in Kyou. You never hear about them going on the Shouzan. For that matter, I've never heard of a koushu becoming emperor, either."

"Koushu are raised in the Yellow Sea since they're children, so they're not going to understand how the outside world works. And I'm not a koushu. It goes both ways, though. A koushu won't understand what it means to grow up as a merchant's daughter either. And yet they go on like they know *everything.* They're all *Miss* this and *Miss* that. Not like they mean it. I can hear the scorn in their voices. But if they're going to insist that only koushu can understand koushu, then *I* will insist that they can't understand *me* unless they were born into the household of a wealthy merchant."

"You're exactly right. It's a small man who cannot grasp the needs of others." Kiwa looked around. "How in the world could people on foot transport all of this? Don't you think so, Shushou?"

Shushou agreed and similarly examined her immediate environment. The wagon was piled high with luggage. Kiwa sat solidly on a thick mat slung between the boxes. Because of the poor state of the road, the ride was anything but comfortable.

"It would be quite impossible for your people to carry all of this." *All of this* came to a horse-drawn wagon and three handcarts.

Shushou nodded, but felt an uneasy qualm in her heart. She said, glancing at Kiwa, "You are carrying a lot of supplies. Why do you need so much?"

Kiwa smiled. “I am a man who prefers to travel with a generous entourage. Simply feeding them takes an equally generous amount of food. I ask you, how could we otherwise carry the necessary water and food to cover an unknown distance taking several days?”

Food for forty-plus people would indeed add up. But Shushou cocked her head to the side and asked, “Couldn’t the members of your retinue each carry their own provisions?”

Kiwa waved his hand as if the subject was hardly worth discussing. “Perhaps if we knew how long it was going to take. To start with, we’re hauling our water in barrels, not the kind of thing a man could easily bear on his own. Even divvied up, there’d be no way to carry individual portions.”

“Yeah,” Shushou mumbled. She looked over her shoulder. The curtains of the covered wagon were drawn back. She could see his men behind the wagon earnestly pushing and pulling the handcarts, packs strapped to their backs.

“What’s the matter, Shushou? You seem unsettled. Are you afraid?”

“Well, I don’t feel that way,” Shushou prevaricated. “It’s hard to say sometimes, you know?”

There were youma around and they were headed straight toward a nest of them. She had good cause to feel uneasy. If that was fear then she was afraid. But having chosen this course over the disagreeableness of putting up with Gankyuu, she wasn’t eager to voice such complaints.

What weighed more on her mind at the moment was traveling in a wagon. She’d been on foot since entering the Yellow Sea, gathering up firewood along the way and filling her canteen from springs. Traveling seated didn’t sit well with her.

“There’s nothing to worry about, Shushou. Those trees indicating the presence of youma were cut down at the beginning of last winter, weren’t they? Youma have to eat. With the road blocked, nobody would be passing their way. They’d surely go elsewhere for food.”

“Well, yes, that’s probably the case.”

“Of course it is,” Kiwa proudly declared with a smile. “After spending this much time in the Yellow Sea, even amateurs can learn a thing or two. I’m not one to look down my nose at the accomplishments of others. That’s where Chodai and I differ. I’ve been watching what the goushi do, you see. But I couldn’t possible discard my wagon. It contains too many things a man like me can’t go without.”

Like your luggage, Shushou thought, while nodding in wan agreement. “But doesn’t the problem come down to taking a full ration of water with you? What if, for the time being, you carried what you could and did you best to make it last?”

“Not knowing whether there will be potable water waiting for us ahead?”

“That’s true, except that Gankyuu and the koushu each carry a single canteen. If

the koushu can make it work, surely you and your men could get by each carrying his own rations?"

Kiwa waved his hand. "I'm afraid there's where you can't lump me in with the koushu. The koushu have those stones that purify undrinkable water."

"Ah, yes. Now that you mention it."

"I had no idea such things existed. So, of course, we have none of our own. That's why we have to carry so much more water than the koushu." As if those same koushu were still around, Kiwa lowered his voice to a whisper. "You hear about what happened back there?"

"Back there?"

"At the lake where you couldn't drink the water."

Shushou felt a chill down her spine. "Um, well—"

"The water in the stream flowing from there to the marsh is undrinkable too."

"Stands to reason. It flows down from the lake."

"And that's why it you can't drink it. But not everybody travels with a full supply of water like me."

"True."

"The goushi put the rocks into that water and make it potable. The kind of thing anybody here would want, don't you think?"

"I would think so."

"I heard that those short on water went asking for some and got turned down point-blank. What could they do? Once they ran out of water they could drink, they'd have no choice but to drink the water they couldn't."

"And did they?"

"No, no." Kiwa shook his head. "They went back to the goushi and begged for some stones. The goushi wouldn't budge an inch. So they found themselves at the end of their rope."

"Are you telling me they tried to steal them?"

"Well, *tried.* Rather pathetically. Personally, I wouldn't have had it in me to take them to task. Without anything to drink, they were going to die of thirst. At any rate, I heard there was hell to pay when they were found out."

"It turned into a brawl. That was after leaving the marsh, wasn't it?" She was pretty sure she'd caught sight of the scene.

"That it was. The goushi ganged up for a few rounds of punching and kicking, but let them off with the warning that under any other circumstances, they would have tossed them into a youma nest. Seeing as they were right back where they started, I shared some of my supplies."

"Oh."

"A sad tale, don't you think? When you come across people in dire circumstances,

it's only natural to lend a hand, isn't it? Doing nothing when people are at their wit's end and settling the matter with violence? I felt it was about time I parted way with the goushi. This was a opportunity worth taking advantage of."

"I suppose so."

Kiwa was certainly correct. If the koushu weren't thirsty, it didn't matter to them how much anybody might want a drink. That's what it came down to.

But she also knew about the "jug stones" Kiwa had mentioned. Gankyuu kept a number of them in a small satchel. The stones, however, did not last forever. A stone could be used only one time. They started out white, then turned a pale black or green color.

"Those goushi, they're hard nuts to crack."

Shushou said, "The goushi don't have an unlimited numbers of those stones, you know." When Kiwa bridled she quickly added, "It's not like I'm covering for them or anything. But they probably only carry enough stones for themselves. They have to calculate how long it will take to get to Mt. Hou, the distances involved, and prepare the number of stones they'll need along the way. Handing them out would put them in a fix. Because of the stones, they don't bring extra water with them."

"And when a thirsting man appears in front of you?"

"I'm not denying it, but the goushi don't have enough to share with everybody. Gankyuu is ever mindful of the rainfall, so I have to believe he's cutting it fine. It's easy being charitable with the people right in front of you, except won't everybody start asking for a handout then? There's no way everybody can have one. In the first place, they only work once. What happens when people come back for more? In which case, there'd soon be no stones left for anyone."

"In other words, anticipating your own need for water in the future, you should cast aside those in dire need now?"

"Yes, it could turn out that way. But however terrible it may be turning away those in need, would it really be any different knowing they'd be coming back to you in the future in the same straits? Goushi are responsible for more than their own lives. They are entrusted with those of their employer. Making a show of such sympathies *now* when it will condemn their employer to a gruesome death *later* would be turning their priorities upside down."

"Ah. So as long as their employer stays safe and they collect the balance of their fees, they shouldn't worry their little heads about what it took to get them."

"I didn't mean that. Oh, I don't know. I can't explain what I mean." Shushou sighed and looked away.

Kiwa smiled. "I understand that you feel a sense of obligation to the goushi, and hence your impulse to rationalize their behavior."

"Not my intent."

Shushou really wasn't trying to cover for them. The goushi and koushu didn't want or need anybody making excuses for them. Though it'd be hard to read what she was saying as anything but exactly that.

White sunlight bathed the road ahead. The wagon continued on in a faint cloud of dust. Sweat glistened on the foreheads of the men hauling the handcarts. They were piled with a *lot* of supplies.

It was three months until the Summer Solstice, the next opportunity to leave the Yellow Sea. If they didn't want to starve to death in the meantime, they'd need all that food. Thinking about it that way, somebody like Gankyuu must be out of his mind making the round trip on a single kijuu while carrying only what he could.

"But he's not," Shushou mumbled to herself.

Gankyuu hadn't brought along any rice. Shushou would have expected him to pack rice and barley. He hadn't at all. Only a sack of what looked like flour. It made up the bulk of every main meal. Boiling water added to a half-filled bowl would expand enough to top off three full bowls. The gruel was flavored with locally-found herbs, or shavings from beef jerky, dried shrimp or seaweed or tea.

The equivalent amount of rice, wheat or barley couldn't be crammed into a space so small. Gankyuu only packed provisions that'd allow them to leave at a moment's notice. Come to think of it, Rikou carried much the same. How did he know it'd be so necessary?

At any rate, because they traveled so light, they could leave almost at once when youma attacks came.

Kiwa was hauling along an extremely generous amount of supplies. He was a man of considerable weight. Literally. But was that the wisest strategy? Especially with youma ready to pounce on them at any moment.

"Hey, Shitsu-san, don't you think maybe it'd be a good idea if we went back?" When Kiwa regarded her with a sour expression, she added, "Even discarding most of the luggage, it'd probably be the safest course."

"Do that, Shushou, and the two of us would have to walk the rest of the way."

"Most everybody else is already walking. It's hardly impossible."

"But not something *I* could do. Surely you understand *that* much."

Chapter 25

[4-2] **E**ven when Kiwa stopped at noon, he pitched a small tent and spread out a ground tarp. Wheat flour was kneaded into dough, pan-fried over a fire (using a bisque), and served with soup and tea and fruit.

Shushou couldn't stomach the meal. This wasn't the kind of food that people traveling in the Yellow Sea should be eating. Come nighttime, Kiwa thought nothing of lighting another fire to cook rice.

"Maybe we should hold off on the fire," Shushou said, stopping what she was doing.

But Kiwa only responded with a surprised expression. "Without a fire, we won't be able to eat anything.

"Didn't the goushi say not to light any fires back when crossed those fallen trees?"

"We've traveled well beyond that point."

Now Shushou was the one taken aback. There was a youma down this road, dangerous enough that the goushi were literally going out of their way to avoid it. That's why Kinhaku said to keep a low profile, to not light fires and not slaughter any livestock. Because any youma in the vicinity would sense a human presence, see the fires, and smell the blood.

All the more so since they might have passed within a stone's throw of the creature.

"They didn't mean that only fires back there were dangerous. They're a risk everywhere."

"Fires are a risk?"

"That's why the goushi only make small fires and put them out as quickly as possible."

"And so will we, as soon as possible."

"But in a place like this—"

Kiwa had halted the wagon beneath a tree alongside the road. The tent covering the wagon was fully exposed to the broad expanse around them. Nothing shaded the light of the fire. Like the goushi, they'd fenced in the fire with a screen of branches but clearly didn't understand why.

The care Gankyuu took in that regard was obvious without explanation. The canopy of the trees masked the presence of human and kijuu and fires, especially from the eyes of flying youma. When the concealing canopy was high above, boughs could be pulled down to form an overhanging lean-to.

Likewise, the screen around the campfire concealed the flames as much as possible. No matter how many branches were stuck around a fire, they'd have no effect if it was stuck out in the open.

"Shitsu-san, the branches surrounding the campfire—"

"Oh, that," interrupted Kiwa. "You've seen those before, haven't you, Shushou?

That corpse hunter does the same thing. A windbreak, I imagine. Or maybe a warding spell. Those corpse hunters do strange things. I have to wonder if it actually amounts to anything."

Shushou couldn't believe her ears. He'd trailed after the goushi for weeks, slavishly aping their actions without grasping why they did what they did or what they were trying to achieve. It was as if safety could be found in the mere ritual of copying people who knew more than he did.

"Shitsu-san, please put out that fire."

"Shushou?"

"The koushu don't light fires when it's dangerous. Where there are man-made fires, youma know there are men. A fire is like a bulls-eye to them."

Kiwa's eyes opened wide. His mouth popped open like a fish. He cried out, "Extinguish the fires!"

His attendants looked back at him with blank faces. He raised his voice and ordered them to put out the campfires. As the flames winked out, uneasy murmurs filled the dark campsite.

A number of people came up to Kiwa. They weren't in his retinue but had chosen to follow his party on the Shouzan.

"Shitsu-san, is it wise to keep the campsite this dark?"

"We haven't finished cooking."

"I understand your qualms but please put up with it for the time being. Youma are known to target fires."

Reassured by Kiwa's explanation, Shushou pointed into the forest. "Beneath a big tree should be okay. Better one with thick foliage and low-lying branches."

"You must be joking," Kiwa said, shaking like he'd just had the fright of his life. "Youma are attracted to fire like moths to a flame, are they not?"

"Yes. That's why you build a small fire beneath a tree and enclose it so it can't be seen."

"You think a few boughs are going to block all the light coming from a fire?"

"But—"

"You can see light through the branches of a tree, can't you? Don't youma have keen night vision? No, no. Fires are completely out of the question!"

"Not being able to see the area around you is no less dangerous. On a moonless night like tonight, you can keep a fire at safe distance from where you're sleeping as long as it's well-concealed and burning low."

"If you can see your surroundings, then couldn't whatever's in your surroundings see a fire?"

"That's true, but—"

"Wouldn't you be inviting a youma attack right under your nose?"

“That why a fire at a safe distance from where you’re sleeping—”

“No. That is a risk I simply cannot tolerate.”

Shushou tried her best to explain but now Kiwa had the idea lodged in his head that youma targeted fire and couldn’t shake it loose. He had the ears to hear and wouldn’t listen to a thing.

“Unbelievable,” Shushou sulked to herself. “Like talking to a stump.” She approached one of Kiwa’s attendants and asked to borrow a goat. “I’m not going to steal it or anything. I need it in place of a bed.”

She hurried to a proper-looking tree, ducked beneath the branches and tied the goat to a bush.

“Miss—”

Turning to the person calling out to her, Shushou found several of the people accompanying Kiwa on the Shouzan standing there.

“Traveling with that corpse hunter, you learned the safest way to bed down for the night, didn’t you?”

“I’m not sure what I’ve learned—”

“You’ve been closer to him than the rest of us. At least share with us what you’ve observed.”

“Well, sleep beneath a tree, the leafier the better. Conceal yourselves with bushes like these, or rocks, or fallen trees. A hollow in the earth with do in a pinch.”

“Of course.”

“White tents are easy to spot. In most cases, you should do without. If the branches are tall and long, use a rope to bend them down around you. Or else cut down the boughs and cover yourself with them like a blanket.

“That makes sense.”

“Stick close to trees that emit a strong aroma. And keeping a fire going isn’t a bad idea.”

“But a fire—”

“I’m not talking about a roaring bonfire. Build a hearth and kindle a fire at a good distance but still in sight. Gankyuu cuts down pine boughs and places them over the fire, though I don’t know how to keep a fire smoldering like that without going out.”

“So a fire is better.”

“Fires are always dangerous. But on a night like tonight, doing without is more so. You can’t see any youma that get close. The darker it is, the further away the fire should be. That gives you a margin of safety while remaining visible. Youma have good night vision so the right kind of extra light makes it harder for them to make out details. But you’ll still want to sleep with the horses and kijuu. Animals have keener senses than humans. They’ll react first if a youma gets close. That’ll be the alarm that wakes you up.”

“Yeah, figures,” her audience agreed.

Shushou felt a sudden sense of unease. They were hanging on her every word. Gankyuu said they wouldn’t but that wasn’t true. Average folk here really did value what the koushu knew. But should she be the one sharing that knowledge?

They eagerly let her have her say, yet getting the attention she wanted left her feeling conflicted. Shushou hadn’t grown up in the Yellow Sea like the koushu. Her knowledge came from watching Gankyuu, listening to him, and reading between the lines. And here she was prattling on like a know-it-all.

“Um—” Shushou hastily amended her remarks. “I couldn’t possible know as much about the Yellow Sea as the koushu. Don’t treat anything I say like I’m some sort of expert.”

“That’s okay. Thanks.”

“No problem,” Shushou answered with a relieved smile. She watched them leave and threw her arms around the neck of the goat. “Well, tonight it’s just going to be you and me.”

Except the goat had evidently taken a disliking to her and tried to jerk free instead. Trying to calm it down, the light of a fire grew visible through the trees. Soon followed by the sound of running feet and angry shouts and men arguing, the hiss of water cast on hot embers and feet stomping out flames. She watched dumbfounded as darkness again filled the forest.

“Amazing. The only person Shitsu-san will listen to is himself.”

Chapter 26

[4-3] **S**hushou gave up on the irascible goat, burrowed beneath the bushes, and tried to sleep. It’d be a lie to say she wasn’t disheartened and ill at ease. Unleashed by the quiet, dark night around her, unwelcome thoughts bubbled up in her head and wouldn’t let her rest.

Rather than abandon three handcarts and a horse-drawn wagon heavily laden with supplies, Kiwa had chosen to travel down this dangerous road where he’d been warned youma lurked. The sheer amount of luggage alone set her nerves on edge. It simply wasn’t appropriate for traveling in the Yellow Sea.

She’d come with Kiwa on the spur of the moment because she couldn’t stand looking Gankyuu in the face any longer. But the only thing she could definitely say

about Kiwa's knowledge of the Yellow Sea was that the louder he talked, the less he knew.

He shouldn't have taken another step without getting a thorough briefing from the goushi.

On the other hand, the second he found out that "fire is dangerous," he set about dousing the fires before anybody could get a word in edgewise.

Chodai's question popped into her head: *Did your professors only give you the answers?*

Wasn't saying "fire is dangerous" only giving him the answer? She wasn't exactly crystal clear herself about *what* kind of fires were dangerous and in *what* situations. Sometimes tending a fire at a safe distance was necessary. Sometimes any fire at all was a bad idea. Until now, she'd relied on Gankyuu to make these fine distinctions.

Knowing "fires are dangerous" was like knowing the answer to the question, not why that answer was the right one.

I need to get a thorough explanation of all the ins and outs of stuff like this.

But was that even possible? Having grown up in the Yellow Sea, the koushu learned its ways through long experience. Without those deep reservoirs of experience to draw on, would the true meaning of that knowledge ever sink in?

I may be harboring second thoughts here—

There was no *may* about it. She had to squarely face that unpleasant fact. Being with Kiwa wasn't where she was supposed to be. *Here* wasn't where she was supposed to be. She felt completely out of place.

That shushi's attitude is rubbing off on me. Except her anger and indignation towards Gankyuu still sat heavy on her heart. *And it's not like he's going to come and apologize.*

She wanted to believe that he didn't rush to stop her because the road ahead wasn't that big a risk. He had his money. At the very least, he could have made a token apology, gone through the motions of looking out for her best interests. Or maybe, just maybe, the road ahead wasn't dangerous enough for him to bother running after her.

That's not true. I was the one who fired him. Why should he give a damn about me now? That's the kind of man he is.

This whole thing was *so* exasperating. And to make matters worse, Rikou wasn't coming either. Despite following her all the way to the Yellow Sea.

I hate this. I'm sulking like a little kid. That's what annoyed her the most.

Shushou finally fell asleep. But not for long. She awoke in the middle of the night, momentarily confused as to why she was awake at all.

She was groggy with drowsiness and her mind was muddled. She turned her attention to the goat. She should be able to make out its white coat in the dark. She

couldn't see it. It was sleeping behind the tree or on the other side of the bush. Sure this was nothing to be alarmed about, she reached for the halter rope.

Shushou had rested her head against the trunk, using the thick mat of roots as a pillow, with her feet stretched out beneath the bushes. The halter rope was tied around the tree right next to her head. She gave it a light yank. Feeling no response, she tugged again. The slack reeled in without any resistance.

This isn't right, she thought, then noticed that the rope was wet. *Wet from what?* she wondered. Before she could puzzle out a reason, she was holding the unattached end of the rope in her hand.

The goat— She was wide awake in a flash. The rope draped over her head was torn in two.

The goat's not here. A shiver ran through her. The hand pulling on the rope was sticky and damp.

She barely managed to stifle the shriek rising to her lips. She wanted to fling the rope aside and clamber to her feet. Summoning all of her inner strength, she managed to hold on. Gripping the rope in her trembling hand, she held her breath and pricked up her ears.

I can't move, she told herself. *I can't make a sound.* She couldn't stop her eyes from searching the darkness or her breath from growing ragged in her throat. She breathed in and out as quietly as possible. Her heartbeat thundered so loudly in her ears she couldn't hear anything else. Though it wasn't like a shrieking commotion would come flooding in if she could only still her racing heart.

It is close by? Or rather—

She sharpened her senses but couldn't hear anything other than the sound of her breathing and beating heart. She could vaguely make out the outlines of the trunk, the undulating mat of knobby roots, the shrubs and bushes within reach of her outstretched hand—and there was nothing there.

Where did it wander off to?

The thought had barely crossed her mind when something wet splashed across her cheek. Like a drop of water. One, then two. The drops struck her cheek and ran down her face. Splashed onto her forehead and ran toward her eyes.

It must be raining—it was coming from—*above*—

In the tree. Her eyes were focused on the roots. The forking branches of the tree did not extend into her field of view. Raising her eyes, the tree's canopy covered her like an indistinct shadow.

The drops continued, bringing with them a raw and rusty smell. She could no longer ignore what must be right before her eyes. Her heart in her throat, she looked up. She didn't move her body, only held her breath and tipped her head back.

A blob of white was caught in the branches above her head. Next to it squatted a

big black silhouette.

A spasm-like shriek rose up from the pit of her stomach. Her chest convulsed. Her throat burned. Her mouth made no sound. Not because she'd successfully swallowed the scream but because she'd momentarily been struck dumb.

Her body went numb. Her chest throbbed. The white blob stretched apart and tore in two. More drops pattered down.

It's going to notice me. If she kept standing there it was bound to notice her. She should run away while it was consumed with consuming the goat. It only had to lower its gaze the tiniest amount to see her.

I've got to flee first.

But how to run away without making any noise? That was the last thing worth worrying about. The beating of her heart, the grinding of her teeth, should have given her away in the first place.

Except—I can't move. Not even her little finger. *I really was a fool.* The regrets crowded into her thoughts. *Gankyuu—save me—*

As if in answer to her prayers, a man cried out, "Hey, the horses!"

The branch creaked, the thing over her head shifted its position. More voices hollered back and forth. With a grotesque splatter and a reeking smell, the white blob fell to the ground next to Shushou's feet.

The branch creaked again, bent like a bow, and sprang back. Followed by the neighing of horses and the hustle and bustle of people on the move. Shushou trained her eyes on the treetops. The branch stopped shaking. The black shadow was gone.

Chapter 27

[4-4] **O**ne of Kiwa's men awoke to find that the horse tethered next to him was gone. Worried it had run off, he looked around and spotted the horse lying in the tall grass not far off. He ran over and discovered the animal's hindquarters. The rest of the horse was nowhere in sight.

His alarmed shouts brought the others running. Unable to bear the suffocating darkness, somebody struck up a fire. Here and there among the company, horses and men had disappeared while leaving the rest behind.

They lit torches, drew their weapons, and sought out survivors. They found a girl and the remains of a goat beneath a tree. For a moment, they thought she was

another victim. Then with a shriek of relief she realized she'd been saved.

The search continued until dawn, turning up four corpses torn to pieces and a number of dismembered livestock, and no sign of the creature that had caused the carnage.

"Shushou, are you all right?" Kiwa hugged her close.

She daubed at her face with a damp rag. "I'm alive. I'm fine."

"But—"

"Let me go, please. There's blood all over my hair and clothing. I need to wash it off."

Kiwa started to object again, but instead, he had three stout women from his retinue accompany her to the stream.

The sun rose over the green campsite. The road shone like a winding white ribbon, so bright and cheerful, as if the land was spinning an elaborate lie about its true nature.

Accompanied by the three women, Shushou scooted down the shoulder of the road to the bank of a narrow stream. She scrubbed her face and rinsed out her hair. The strong, rough hands of the women pitched in to help.

The cold stream water numbed her face. She took off her clothes. One woman washed it, as if mourning the soiling of such a fine garment. The others wiped down her body with wet hand towels.

"It must have been very frightening. You poor thing."

"I'm okay. I got out of it alive. That's all that matters."

"You're okay? My, my. There's no need to put up such a brave front."

"I really am. Though I was scared."

Thinking about it was frightening, but now she only shivered from the cold. After a perfunctory toweling off, wrapped in a dry robe, the shivering began in earnest. Back on the warm road, though, her emotions snapped back to normal.

She was alive and luck was on her side.

The remains of the humans and the animal were buried in a corner of the campsite. This wasn't the first youma attack they'd suffered. It was the first time an attacker had left enough of a body behind to bury. That alone was terrifying.

Shushou watched the scene, the hairs on the back of her neck pricking up. A flustered Kiwa came up to her. "How are you doing, Shushou? Have your nerves settled down?"

"Pretty much so. Sorry about the goat. I know it was one of yours."

Kiwa waved his hand back and forth. "No need to apologize. It's reward enough knowing that you're safe and sound." He followed the direction of her gaze and nervously nudged her in the opposite direction. "You don't want to look at such things.

How about we get something warm in your stomach?"

He guided her to his wagon. A small fire was burning. Water steamed in a kettle. Shushou accepted a cup of green tea and sat down by the fire. Any lingering anxieties vanished. And once they had, it didn't take long for her to notice that nobody else was crowding around the fire, for it was quite hot.

"Unbelievable. Last night, after expressly telling them not to, a couple of idiots started kindling fires. *That's* what probably led to *this.* Those fires must have drawn the youma here. I had to put my foot down. I let them know that any more such foolishness and they were free to head back the way they came."

"What?"

"There's no stopping fools from doing what fools do, except when it places the lives of others in danger. We'll be fine, Shushou. Nothing like that will happen again."

"Just a minute—"

"Once you've got your wits about you, climb aboard the wagon. We'll be on our way as soon as the burials are finished."

"But Shitsu-san!"

"What? Still frightened? I certainly cannot fault you for that, but staying here any longer would be dangerous. We have to put this place behind us as quickly as possible."

With that Kiwa ran off to order his retinue around. Shushou watched him in blank amazement. "What's going through his mind? And here I thought he was one of the good guys."

It was becoming obvious that Kiwa had no grasp of the big picture. They'd come down a road they never should have set foot on. *That's* why the youma attacked. Their primary objective at his point should be to beat a fast retreat. Definitely not continue to plod forward.

Not to mention that the youma had left ravaged corpses behind and vanished into thin air. Didn't Kiwa see a deeper meaning in such strange behavior? Though the smell of blood was in the air, no other youma showed up. That's why remains were left lying around—the smaller scavenger youma didn't dare invade this territory.

Meaning it belonged to one big and scary creature.

"We can't go any further."

Of course the goushi had taken a detour. This youma played on a completely different level than any they'd encountered so far.

Shushou got to her feet. She'd turn back on her own and run to catch up with the shushi. Except she couldn't make her feet take the first step. Kiwa and company weren't dissuaded in the least. She had to wonder if she was right to abandon them without trying to persuade them otherwise.

She would explain to Kiwa that this route was too dangerous and convince them to

turn back. If they hurried, they could probably catch up with the goushi.

"Ah, but no. Shitsu-san has his horse-drawn wagon."

Considering the amount of effort it'd take getting him to part with *that,* she had to conclude that setting off on her own was her best option. Head back, catch up with the others, explain the situation. At a time like this, the goushi should know best how to proceed.

Pondering the possibilities, Shushou wrapped her arms around her head. "I can't imagine the goushi rushing to the rescue in a situation like this."

They'd come down this road after ignoring the goushi's warnings. She could hardly be sure of her ability to navigate what was barely a footpath and still catch up with the koushu. If she had a kijuu, maybe.

"I've got no choice but to convince all of them to go back. Shitsu-san has to get rid of the wagon and divvy up the supplies."

The problem was, a company of this many people wheeling about and charging back down the road could entice the youma to follow. This youma hid itself at the sound of human voices, proof that it was more intelligent than the ones they'd encountered thus far. They would be drawing the others into the same danger.

"I am a bloody fool."

However mad she was at Gankyuu and Rikou, she couldn't stomach the way things were going. Shushou knew what she had to do.

"But how to do it?"

Kiwa proceeded up the road. For the time being, unable to come to a decision, Shushou rode in his wagon. Three times already, the procession came to a halt as people walking along the shoulder of the road simply vanished.

The youma had darted in and snatched them away.

It must be lurking in the woods, waiting for a gap to grow in the line or for somebody to lag behind. The victims were mostly torn to shreds. This youma, it seemed, killed for *sport.*

Spurred on by a primeval fear, people instinctively picked up the pace. The outriders instead pressed their mounts into the middle of the road, jostling shoulder to shoulder. Come nighttime, they crowded together quiet as mice, awake and alert until the morning broke.

And yet when the sun finally rose in the east, a few more had been picked off here and there.

"If we don't hunt it down—"

Sooner or later they were going to join up again with the koushu. At this rate, they were simply leading the predator to more prey. They had to stop and kill the beast. However she pleaded with Kiwa, he showed not the slightest inclination to take such

measures.

They soon gave up tracking down the victims and burying them. The company grimly hurried along in a cloud of dust. Nobody slept long or well. After two days maintaining a pell-mell pace, they came to a break in the forest.

The collective cry of relief rose into the air. The youma had no hiding places here. A broad savanna opened up before their eyes. The bleak landscape stretched to the far horizon, strewn with boulders and populated only by overgrown bushes and low-lying shrubs, like small undulations in a broad sea.

“Ah, a welcome change. With no place to conceal itself, this youma is bound to give up the chase.” Kiwa smiled and urged the men and horses forward. Like sailors lost as sea finally spying land, they surged ahead with renewed hope.

It was past noon when screams erupted at the rear of the long procession. Shushou caught a glimpse of a big ape-like creature. The tail end of the line disintegrated. People scattered onto an adjoining rise that provided a fuller view of their surrounding.

The horses drawing the wagon set off at a gallop. The people on foot quickly fell far behind, then disappeared behind the gentle rise and fall of the terrain.

“Shitsu-san, you can’t! Those people—!”

“I can’t do anything for them anyway, Shushou. We must take this opportunity to escape.”

“But—!”

“I certainly feel sorry for those who were attacked. What could I do by turning back? Salve my own conscience? Don’t we have a more important mission to accomplish?”

“A mission?”

“That’s right. Why are we going on the Shouzan? One of us must go to Mt. Hou, become emperor, and save the Kingdom of Kyou along with its three million subjects. For any of those capable of ascending to the throne to sacrifice their lives out of concern for a handful would only place the lives of those three million in greater danger.”

Shushou glared at Kiwa. “Do you think that those incapable of saving a handful can save millions?”

“Do you think any emperor can reign without killing a single person?”

Shushou set her jaw and didn’t answer.

“Do you sacrifice the few and save the many? Or yield to sentiment and save the few while consigning the kingdom to wrack and ruin? Those who choose to sit upon the throne must be prepared to make countless similar decisions, Shushou.”

“That—”

“I am not saying I do not deeply regret sacrificing them. If I possessed to power to

save them, I would do so without hesitation. But I do not. The best way I can thank them for their honorable sacrifice is to press forward. Afterwards, the only way I can recompense their losses is to never forget my thanks to them and do good by others in equal proportion."

"That is—"

The same attitude as the koushu. When push came to shove, they saved themselves while others were falling victim. But would any other strategy leave more survivors behind?

"I really am an bloody fool," Shushou said to herself, her words drowned out by sound of the racing wagon and galloping horses.

The strong rescued the weak. That was their duty. But nobody was strong in the Yellow Sea. The strong saving the weak only made sense in a world where the strong could save themselves. In the Yellow Sea, the goushi were anything but *strong.*

When a big youma showed up and they couldn't defend themselves against it, they took the long way around. Under more favorable circumstances, they could maybe save two or three besides themselves. So while the goushi were hired as bodyguards, in the Yellow Sea that by no means made them kings of the hill.

In the Yellow Sea, a goushi could defend himself. Expend the minimum amount of energy doing *that* and he'd have enough left over to protect his employer. But exhaust those resources and he wouldn't be able to save anybody else, even if he wanted to.

"That's what it comes down to in the end."

No matter how at home they were in the Yellow Sea, even the koushu didn't rule the roost. They could hardly set forth on such a journey burdened by somebody unprepared in body and mind, and a stranger to boot.

In order guarantee their safety to the greatest extent possible, every member of the expedition must be ready to accept the goushi's advice from the start.

Where drinkable water wasn't available, jug rocks would be provided. Whatever wasn't packed beforehand wouldn't be available later. There weren't any stores in the Yellow Sea. There weren't any roads in the Yellow Sea. The places that were flat and level and straight weren't roads. There was no room for regrets, no way to call off the journey halfway there.

Success in the Yellow Sea was determined by the preparations made before even entering it.

Accept the advice of the goushi, diligently prepare well ahead of time, grant the goushi's knowledge the respect due it, trust the goushi's intuition—otherwise, the protection of the greatest guardian in the world wasn't worth a thing. He who hired a goushi was not the goushi's master. All the authority on the journey must rest with the goushi.

Only the koushu could definitely address such seemingly trifling matters as where

to build a fire and when to extinguish it. They could look at the landscape and size up the situation and come to the right conclusions, the product of the wisdom and experience they'd amassed after living in the Yellow Sea since they were children.

The person in charge on a journey had to be the one with the most experience under his belt. That's what it meant to hire a goushi.

"Hand over a lot of money and have somebody accompany you to Mt. Hou—"

Hiring a bodyguard was a somewhat different proposition. A goushi was hired to go to Mt. Hou. They made the journey. The employer was basically along for the ride.

It was the goushi who shepherded his employer, who provided the necessary leadership and direction. A goushi planned from the start with the needs of the person who paid him in mind. The safety of others, or a Kiwa or a Chodai, simply didn't factor into his thinking. If it did, many more goushi would be required.

"It'd be pretty much pointless unless *everybody* had their own goushi."

One apiece would require a lot of goushi. With that many, the could combine their forces in a pinch and have enough to spare when dangers presented themselves.

Very few of those going on the Shouzan had a goushi. Kiwa had more than forty attendants, but knowing nothing more than them, Kiwa was every bit their equal. Had he hired a goushi before the journey began, the goushi surely would have recommended reducing the size of his retinue and supplementing the company with additional bodyguards.

There had to be a better way than hoping for safety in numbers, none of them knowing how to protect themselves in the Yellow Sea, then running away while the stragglers took the fall.

"It's disgusting that I only figured this out *now,*" Shushou castigated herself as the wagon raced across the prairie. "Gankyuu would be well within his rights calling me on the carpet for such foolishness."

Towards sundown they finally slackened their pace. Having left the youma far behind with its victims, everyone who'd kept up smiled with a survivor's relief.

Shushou got out of the wagon and peered back through the thin veil of dust. The company was a third the size of what it had been. That was how many people they had consigned to oblivion.

She planted her feet on the ground, ground that felt no firmer than a small boat on rough seas, and walked over to where Kiwa was building a fire.

"Shitsu-san, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Yes?" He glanced up at her, his face gentle as a babe's.

"I hate to have to say this, after all that you've done for me."

"Oh, what's this all about, then?"

"I'd like to borrow a little food and water."

“Shushou?”

“I’d also appreciate a lance or sword, if that’s not asking too much.”

“Shushou! What in the world are you going on about? What would you need such things for?”

“I’m going back for them.”

“Shushou!”

“I’m going to try and join up with the rest of the travelers on foot. If that’s possible, and the youma has truly given up the chase, then good. If not, then we’ll need to figure out together how to get rid of that youma.”

A clearly flustered Kiwa grabbed Shushou by the arm. “Don’t say such foolish things!”

“Shitsu-san, don’t you understand? We never should have come down this road. That youma isn’t likely to give up the chase. If we keep going, we’ll inevitably meet up with those who exercised their better judgment in order *not* to get attacked by that youma.”

“But—”

“The stupidity of our actions is a settled fact. Nothing we do now can reverse those decisions. And maybe abandoning the unlucky and running away is nature’s way of allowing fools like us to survive. But inflicting this youma on those who had no part in this foolishness goes beyond the pale.”

“Shushou, calm down and think this through.”

Shushou shook her head. “I have thought it through. I got angry at the way the goushi did things and joined you. I couldn’t stomach being told that because I didn’t know anything about the Yellow Sea, I didn’t have an opinion worth listening to. Except if this was about people who owned and raised horses, say, getting lectured by people who didn’t, it’d be the same thing.”

“Look, Shushou—”

“It is what it is, and no good will come from plowing that ocean. But having lost my temper at the koushu, I can’t repeat the same mistakes here. Nursing emotions like that is stupid. So I’m going back and admitting I was in the wrong and apologizing—that is, if the youma doesn’t follow me.”

“Shushou!”

“I got my dander up without understanding the first thing about what it takes to be a koushu. I ignored their warnings and stepped into this danger all on my own. Running away and leaving behind those on foot is one thing. But to expose the koushu to the same danger? I won’t do it. Do you have in you to part with a portion of your supplies? Only as much as I can carry. Either way, I won’t hold it again you.”

“What reason have I to part with any supplies? This talk of going back—”

“Fine. I understand.” Shushou turned on her heels. Traveling light could prove the

better strategy anyway.

“Shushou, wait.”

“If you don’t have the courage to go back for your own, well, you’re free to do as you see fit. I can’t tell you what to do. Better to go on alone, I suppose, than in the company of a coward who can’t pay the bill for his own foolishness. But don’t expect me to play along any longer.”

“Shushou!”

Shushou said with a final wave, “Thanks for everything, Shitsu-san. Take care of yourself.”

Chapter 28

[4-5] **T**he cloud of dust hanging over the land stained the air yellow.

The man gasped. As he raced down the road, all he could see ahead of him was a tawny haze. His master’s wagon should be somewhere just beyond the haze but he couldn’t catch even a single glimpse.

He climbed every rise in the road praying that at the top the vistas would clear. Or at least that he would find more of their number there taking a break. Or if his luck really held, searchers coming back looking for them.

He prayed in vain.

Wondering if it was about time to give up hope, and yet holding his head high, he came to the crest of another hill, saw only the dust his master had left in his wake, and hung his head. Following along the ground next to him, his shadow grew longer with each stride.

“Shoutan,” one of his companions wheezed, “do you think maybe the master is really gone?”

At this point, Shoutan had to face facts. “Yeah. Sure looks like it.”

He let out a long breath. The painful stitch in his side told him his forty-plus year old body couldn’t take much more of this.

“The master has got to be resting with the others. If we keep going—”

Shoutan stopped and took a breath. He had a hard time believing what he was saying. Kiwa had taken off at a full gallop. Nobody on foot was about to catch up with him. Even if they managed to close the distance while Kiwa was resting, all it’d take was that youma showing up and Kiwa would be gone in a flash. They’d be eating his

dust all over again.

The man running behind Shoutan sank to his knees. “Dammit to hell.”

“Hey!” Shoutan called out.

But the man shook his head. “I’ve had enough. I can’t run another inch.”

Shoutan stopped as well. Another man sat where he was standing and lay down on the ground. And yet another followed his example.

Surely if they kept running they would catch up with Kiwa. But any desire to exhort his companions onward died as well. Shoutan sat down in the middle of the road. His breath was raw in his throat. His body felt like there was a big, hot rock lodged in his side. He lay down.

The youma was coming. It’d followed them all this way. Another attack was inevitable. Kiwa was only opening the distance between them. But he couldn’t care less.

Nobody said anything. They sat there and lay there and took one ragged breath after the other. A group tailing even farther behind caught up with them. They looked at down at Shoutan and the others. Shoutan and the others looked up at them. Nobody said a word.

Their faces twisted in distress. Like a levee giving way they collapsed to the road with a collective gasp. Still nobody spoke. The moon rose. More of Kiwa’s abandoned company arrived in drips and drabs, filling the wash at the base of the hill.

Their master had abandoned them. They were hauling the hand carts when the screams erupted and the master’s wagon disappeared into the distance. Knowing they would catch hell for it afterwards, they abandoned the carts and ran after him. They couldn’t outrace three teams of horses.

In the middle of the savanna, they came across another band of stragglers. Now it was just them. And the youma.

Most going on the Shouzan had horses, so the majority of those left behind were servants and underlings. Among the retainers who’d been abandoned by their masters like Shoutan were equally unlucky castoffs whose employers had died, leaving them no choice but to soldier on.

At any rate, they’d run away as fast as their own two feet would take them. Fighting for each breath, they fled the last place the youma sprang on them from the surrounding field. They didn’t feel any safer. The youma would win any footrace. Without a horse or kijuu, there was no secure place to run to.

Such thoughts spinning through their minds, their legs turned to lead. Once the sheer futility of their efforts welled up in their hearts, they couldn’t take another step.

By the time the moon rose over the eastern horizon, a hundred or so travelers had crowded into the dry wash at the base of the hill. They sat there in silence, broken by the occasional curse hurled at the heavens. Their outbursts went unanswered.

“The night’s coming on.” This observation of the obvious floated like a puff of smoke above the heavy silence.

“Yeah,” Shoutan answered.

The night was coming on. The dangers would multiply. While they were all sitting there, that youma was drawing ever closer.

“Like that makes any difference,” somebody spat out.

Shoutan nodded to that too. They’d been tossed aside like such much refuse. Not a single one of them came to the Yellow Sea because he wanted to. They’d followed their master.

Shoutan was one of Kiwa’s live-in servants. Ordered to accompany him, he couldn’t refuse. And so he’d ended up here. He’d walked a long, long way while his master rode on his wagon, never out of his sight. When his master rested, he worked. And then Kiwa cast him aside and saved his own skin.

When the youma attacked, Shoutan and the others fled on foot. The horses and fleet-footed kijuu made good their escape. They were stuck here. That was pretty much the sum of it.

“What an asshole,” somebody blurted out.

Shoutan couldn’t help but agree. “Definitely.”

“He travels in the lap of luxury all thanks to *us,* and then when the going gets tough uses *us* as human shields.”

“Yeah, he saves himself and runs off to Mt. Hou. Hey, don’t let the likes of *us* slow you down or nothing.”

“If he’s lucky, he gets made emperor and lives the high life forever.”

“Huh. Like a guy who abandons his servants will ever become emperor.”

“I wouldn’t bet against it. A bunch of good-for-nothings are running this world.”

“You got that right.”

“Either way, we are never going to know.”

“Yeah. It’s not like we’re gonna see the gates of Mr. Hou get slammed in their faces.

“Hell, I’ll be happy enough never having to see the likes of him get any more full of himself than he already is.”

A ripple of derisive laughter filled the hollow. Shoutan had to smile as well. He couldn’t do anything else.

“Hey—”

The tense exclamation made Shoutan reflexively draw himself into a defensive crouch. For all of his not giving a damn, that could only be the warning of a youma attack. He was already on his feet and making ready to run for it. He wasn’t the only one. They held their lives dear, after all.

“Something’s coming—”

They drew a simultaneous breath and glanced up the incline that marked the way

forward. Those resting at the edge of the wash craned their necks to peer over the edge.

"A youma?"

"No."

"It's a person."

"Coming this way."

They all gulped in expectation and faced forward.

"One person."

"But that's—"

The men lined up along the rim of the wash clamped their mouths shut. Perched on the forward slope, Shoutan could hear the tiny footsteps too. In the dead calm, each footstep rang out clearly. Then another sound fell down on them like a gentle, warm rain.

"Is somebody in there?"

The footsteps quickened. A small figure appeared atop the sloping bank of the wash.

"Are you all right?"

The question brimmed with concern. The people in the wash had pooled there like sluggish runoff. Now they instinctively answered all at once. Shoutan was no exception. This one girl had come back. She could surely do something for them. But that wasn't what mattered at the moment. They knew she wasn't a servant. She was going on the Shouzan.

The muddled mix of voices became a cry of joy. Taken aback by this reaction, the girl cast her confused gaze across the wash. "You do seem happy to see me. I'm sorry to say that I have no weapons or any other provisions. Just me."

"That's fine with us," somebody answered.

"Oh? Is everybody okay? Is anybody injured?" The girl answered her own questions with a wry smile. "Everybody could hardly be okay. Still, that this many managed to escape is reason enough to rejoice."

Shoutan looked up at her full of grateful expectations. It shouldn't be a question of whether somebody going on the Shouzan would do anything for them. A person going on the Shouzan should by all means be concerned for their lives and safety.

The girl descended into the wash. She took in the crowd before her and said, "Where are your travel packs?"

Almost as if taking the question as a reprimand, one man admitted that he'd tossed his aside and taken off running.

"Yes, when you're running for your life, such things would get in the way. But we must go back and fetch them. We won't get far after this without food and water."

After this, Shoutan repeated to himself.

The girl stopped a few feet away. She turned and said, “Oh, you’re one of Shitsu-san’s attendants. It’s good to see that you’re okay.”

“Yes, um—”

“Let’s go back and retrieve your packs. Is there anybody here who can’t walk?”

“But—”

“Stay here and we’ll eventually die of hunger and thirst. We need those supplies. Food and water. How many here have enough to provision themselves?”

A few hands went up here and there.

“Meaning there is hardly enough for the rest of us. Yes, we have to go back.”

“But—” *Go back and do what? To start with, they didn’t have any horses.*

“But what? We need those supplies, don’t we? Without them, we might as well abandon any hope for the future.” Shushou smiled. “I’m walking all the way to Mt. Hou. After all, youma aren’t allowed on Mt. Hou. C’mon. Let’s go.”

Shushou spoke as if proposing to go out for a stroll. She crossed the wash and started up the other side.

“But—Miss—Shushou-sama—”

“We came this far on foot, did we not? The distance we have left before us is considerably less what we’ve covered so far. A fortnight, I reckon. And we’ve been on the road for almost a month. This is hardly the time or place to start voicing complaints.”

“But—the youma—”

“Haven’t youma been popping up all along the way? Outside the Yellow Sea as well. That you’ve made it this far means that you’ve got luck on your side. And from here on out, it’s hardly possible that all of us will get killed.”

“Are you serious?”

“But without food and water, none of us will live long.”

“Except we’ll have to make the journey back from Mt. Hou too!”

“Yes. The shushi who accompanied me brought along provisions for two, enough to last the round trip, and it wasn’t more than what a strong man could carry on his back. In any event, let’s worry about getting to Mt. Hou first. Once we’re there, I’m sure we can work something out.”

“Work what out?”

“Doesn’t the kirin reside on Mt. Hou? A group this large wasting away in front of the his gate will get his attention right away. He’s certainly not going to stand by while his retainers show us to the curb. At the end of the day, we should end up with enough to get by. The kirin is bound to be a better chap than the master who abandoned you in the Yellow Sea. He’s a creature of mercy and compassion, right?”

Shoutan opened his mouth to respond and laughed instead. “I suppose so.”

“Then let’s be on our way. Even that youma’s not going to loiter in the same place

forever. It's not like something like this has never happened before. We'll go back and sort through the provisions and carry only what we need to get to Mt. Hou."

Around her, people slowly got to their feet.

"That's right! Chins up. When we get to Mt. Hou, who knows? It's not unheard of for the kirin to chose the common man. Servant or master, you'll still end up meeting the kirin. In a very real way, servants go on the Shouzan too. So buck up and put on your best face."

Buoyed by her words, they started back down the road. *She can't possible be that naive,* Shoutan thought to himself. Nevertheless, a spark of hope grew in his heart. This girl's glimpse of the future momentarily focused his attention on his own—a life that a few minutes before didn't matter now amounted to more than nothing.

"Don't spread out. Close ranks. Stay aware of your surroundings. If you spot what looks like a youma, give a shout. If you hear that shout, think of yourself first and run."

"But that youma is faster."

Shushou sighed. "Yes, it is. But running is better than standing still. So run away and hide behind a bush or a boulder."

Shoutan gaped at her. "Hide? How is hiding—"

"If there aren't any bushes or boulders around, lie flat on the ground. No matter how close it gets, don't move and don't make a sound. Youma have a hard time spotting humans in situations like that. It's terrifying but it's your best strategy. That's what I did and it saved me. You remember that?"

"Ah." Shoutan nodded.

"I saw that youma sitting on the limb of a tree right over my head, no further away from me than you are. I managed to stomach my fear and stay very still. That's why I'm standing here right now."

The story had already gotten around. That lent an extra weight to the words of a girl who'd been that close to a youma and lived to tell the tale.

So encouraged, in fits and starts, they made their way back down the road. They came across their discarded supplies around dawn. As before, the youma had left the bodies of the dead behind. They hastily gathered up their belongings. But by the time they'd fashioned them into traveling packs, they were exhausted and in no condition to resume the march.

"Of course," the girl said, observing the sun peeking over the eastern horizon. "There are fewer places to hide here during the day, so the youma shouldn't be as active. We should rest too."

"During the day. Then the best time to walk—"

"—is at night. The visibility is poor and there are plenty of places to hide. No doubt about it, that makes traveling on foot dangerous. There's no telling where youma

might be lurking. But if the visibility improves even slightly, on a moonlit night, for example, you'll be able to notice any approaching shadows."

"I—suppose so."

"Youma aren't at their strongest during the day. They've got good night vision. Light washes out their eyesight. People don't make noise or move around when they're sleeping. Bedding down under a bush or behind a rock just might make you too hard to hunt down."

"That makes sense."

"So it's decided. We'll sleep now. Come evening, we'll resume our journey. Keep your packs close at hand. Water, in particular, like it's attached to your wrist. Anywhere else is too far away."

After that, to make sure they didn't get split up again, Shushou chose a site with a good view of the surrounding area. At some point, she'd assumed command of this motley crew, if for no other reason than nobody else objected or volunteered. They'd grown up being ordered around and quailed when given too much discretion to accomplish a task.

Though the youma attacks continued, those catching the brunt of them bore up stoically while the rest scattered, hiding under bushes and behind rocks as Shushou instructed. Each incident further confirmed the usefulness of the strategy and the overall attitude picked up as well.

When an attack came, they grabbed the hand of their nearest companion and fled into the wilderness. Remaining silent and still took an extraordinary amount of courage. By and by, though, they learned that sharing the terror with another person made it that much easier.

After the youma was done with its mayhem, they went back, gathered up their belongings, and left. After three days and nights of taking one step back for every two steps forward, there were fewer people and fewer supplies.

But the great majority remained in good condition. The band of refugees steadily continued their forward progress.

Chapter 29

[4-6] **K**inhaku crouched down on the road and examined the packed dirt. "I don't see

any wagon tracks."

"Kiwa hasn't arrived yet."

The caravan had continued on through the forest, come across the markers previously left by the goushi, and proceeded into the savanna. After following a narrow valley, they returned to the road. No youma attacked during that time and the going wasn't unusually difficult.

But when they merged back onto the road, there was no sign of Kiwa and the others.

The day was bright and clear. Kinhaku turned to Gankyuu. "Think he got attacked?"

"I'd count on it," was the shushi's blunt response.

"What should we do?"

"What else can we do? The sun's rising. We make camp. If they're alive, they should arrive while we're sleeping. They're not smart enough to hold the high ground during the day and travel at night."

Kinhaku nodded and returned his attention to the road. They'd been attacked by the youma, or else—

The road detoured around small, rocky hill. Scanning the surroundings at the top of the rise, he couldn't see even a cloud of dust in the distance. Swallowing his disappointment, he turned to Gankyuu. The shushi had already gone to look for a campsite.

Kinhaku shook his head. "A shushi is as a shushi does, eh?"

Shushi weren't goushi. Goushi knew the ghastly turns a Shouzan could take when a phoenix was lost. Kinhaku hadn't experienced it himself, but based on what he'd heard from the old-timers, he could well imagine.

When his fellow goushi asked him the same question he'd asked Gankyuu, he told them to make camp.

"And if they don't show up by the time we wake up?"

His answer differed little from Gankyuu's. "What can we do? If they encountered that youma, maybe two or three will scrape through and eventually show up. All we can do is cross our fingers and wait."

"Wouldn't it be better to send a rescue party? At the very least have a runner—"

Kinhaku interrupted him with a sharp look. "Don't go speculating about what might happen next! Talk like that's gonna jinx the good fortune Shinkun has given us so far."

They remained there until sundown. Nobody appeared on the road. The goushi calmed down the others who wanted to charge on ahead and convinced them to stay the night. The next day as the afternoon wore on, a cloud of dust rose in the distance.

The dust arose from the far reaches of the road as it skirted a low cliff. They could see stones tumbling into the dry river bottom at the bottom of the valley.

"Somebody's coming!"

A cheer arose as the dozen or so men riding horses and several sad excuses for kijuu came down the road. They spotted the crowd waiting for them and sprinted the rest of the way, the relief painted on their faces.

Kinhaku stepped forward to greet them. "You can't be the only survivors!"

Gasping for breath the lead rider said, "No. The rest are way to the rear."

"There was this youma—"

Kinhaku nodded. "You went that way knowing as much. Where are the others? How long till they get here?"

"Kiwa's company should be coming up behind. But there are people on foot."

Kinhaku glared at him. "Meaning you abandoned them and took off?"

A shrug and a nod answered that question. Kinhaku clucked to himself. "What about the girl? Is she safe?"

"Don't know. I think she was with Kiwa."

"And where is Kiwa?"

"He's been delayed."

"No," interjected one of the kijuu riders. "I saw her climb off Kiwa's wagon and head back."

"Head back? You mean, to join the servants on foot?"

"Probably."

"And the youma? Is it dead?"

"Far from it."

"Damn and blast!" Kinhaku ran back to his companions. "Five of you stay behind. Come sundown, get this caravan back on the road and keep going no matter what!"

"What's the plan?"

"That youma. Those bastards ran away without taking care of it."

"Which means—"

"It'll keep on coming. It's in a youma's nature. They develop a taste for things. Preying on humans is easier than hunting other youma." Kinhaku glanced back at Gankyuu. "So what does the shushi master think? Seems the girl felt sorry for the stragglers and went back to help."

"So it seems," Gankyuu murmured. He said with a wry smile, "I had intended to split off and go hunting. But I'm fine with staying behind and taking my turn looking after the others."

"Works for me," Kinhaku answered with an equally droll expression.

Rikou was standing next to Gankyuu. He stepped in and said, "Gankyuu and I will go with you."

Gankyuu glanced at him. “Oh?”

Rikou smiled. “Let’s do this together.”

“Haven’t you lost interest in Shushou by now?”

“I don’t recall saying anything of the sort.”

Gankyuu sighed. “I’ve said it before but it bears repeating: the girl simply doesn’t need you anymore.”

“True. But perhaps I may prove myself necessary to her once again. I can’t walk away now without putting that supposition to the test.”

“We’re likely going to have a youma on our tails. I’d think you’d hold your life a little more dear. As for me, I’ve got no interest in riding to the rescue.”

“I’m not talking about *asking* you to ride to the rescue. I’m hiring you to.”

Gankyuu said with a jesting grin, “Oh? How much? I take half up front, you know. In cash.”

“How about this?” Rikou tossed him Seisai’s reins. He unfastened the haku’s halter rope from the nearby rock. “Take as your pay the difference in value between a suugu and a haku. I don’t imagine you’d object to that. C’mon.”

Chapter 30

[4-7] **O**bserving the ragtag company moving along at a determined pace and half-listening to Shoutan chatting cheerfully beside her, Shushou nursed troubled thoughts. If they kept going down the road like this, they were bound to join up with Gankyuu and the rest of the caravan.

And the youma clearly intended to stick with them the whole way.

Except as long as they were on this road, there wasn’t anything else they could do but keep putting one foot ahead of the other. When and where and how they would hunt down the youma was very much up in the air.

Though most in their group weren’t armed, a fair number carried weapons. The typical youma had to stop to eat whatever it attacked. At that moment it could be overwhelmed by a massed assault. This youma, however, appeared in a flash, ravaged one or two, and disappeared just as fast. When it was in a mood to eat, it didn’t lounge around but dragged off its victim. It didn’t leave its enemies any openings.

“What’s on your mind?” Shoutan asked.

Shushou managed a smile. “Since we can’t very well run away, I’ve been thinking

about how to hunt down that youma."

"Hunt that thing?"

"We'll have to figure out how to get it to stop moving. There doesn't seem any way to even slow it down."

"Yeah," Shoutan mumbled. He said in a louder voice, "Shushou-sama, look."

A black object squatted on the road ahead of them. Despite the smell of blood in the air, the moonlight was bright enough to tell it wasn't a youma. A horse-drawn wagon in rather wretched condition had been abandoned there.

"The master's wagon."

"So he finally gave up and left it behind."

The irony of the situation hardly escaped her. Kiwa had expressly come this way so as not to lose his precious wagon. When they drew closer, several people emerged from behind it, riders whose mounts had been killed and more servants cast aside by Kiwa.

"What about Shitsu-san?"

"He got on one of the horses and rode away."

"Oh. What a dutiful lord of the manor. Well, it's good to see you folks alive."

"What should we do?" asked Shoutan.

"There might be useful supplies left in the wagon. Let's take a look."

They took a break while Shushou searched the bed of the wagon. She said, "The wagon cover and tents might come in handy as camouflage. During the day, the canvas shouldn't look much different than big rocks."

Shoutan nodded. "We could cut them into pieces and hand them out."

"Let's do that. Start with the weak and the injured."

"Understood." He summoned the others. "Hey—!"

Confirming that Shoutan had relayed these instructions to his companions, Shushou resumed rooting through the supplies.

"The water barrels are here. A few are still intact. Let's divvy them up. What's in these smaller kegs?"

"Probably sake and oil."

"Can't do better than oil. We can use the alcohol to treat injuries. We need smaller containers, though. Portion it out to people who have something to carry it in." Shushou moved onto the next item and stopped in surprise. "Silk."

Shoutan chuckled. "The master brought it to present to the people on Mt. Hou."

"Amazing. He needed this big wagon to carry all this stuff. Well, that's the mind of a merchant trader for you."

They sorted through the dazzling array of exquisite fabrics, flagons and baubles. "Ah, there are some vases here. They look stupidly expensive, but if we cut up this fur coat to use as stoppers, they'll come in handy.

"Yep," Shoutan said with another sardonic smile. His master was indeed a fool,

making this girl's determined good intentions no less curious by comparison.

"I wonder what this is?"

A box made of solid oak. The lid was loose. Using one of the trinkets as a lever, she wrenched it open. Seeing what was inside, Shushou suppress a gasp.

"My word!" *What in the world was Kiwa thinking?* It was a jewelry box crammed with necklaces and ornate hairpins. "What possible good would—"

She was about to cast them aside and abruptly stopped and looked again. Finely wrought gold and silver. And *jewels.*

Shoutan said softly, "If Shushou-sama wished to take those, I certainly wouldn't object."

Shushou shook her head, reflexively grasping at the front of her kimono jacket. "Gather together as many of these as you can find. I don't care about the gold and silver. Save anything with gems or jewels, no matter how small. Turn the place upside down."

"Everything?"

"Yes. Check those oil and sake flasks too."

Beneath the jacket she felt the outlines of the talisman and thought back to the shrine next to the Earth Gate. A Kenrou Shinkun talisman, for protection in the Yellow Sea. Kenrou Shinkun, with his armor and his shawl strewn with jewels. She didn't know whether they'd work on that red monkey but it wouldn't hurt to try.

"After that, please round up everybody who's carrying a weapon."

Shushou stood in front of the assembled group. Moonlight made any passing face appear untrustworthy. With several dozen men gathered together that was not an impression easily brushed off.

"We have here oil and sake that Shitsu-san left behind. And necklaces and hairpins."

A murmur rustled through the crowd.

"As long as we're not doing the hunting, we'll be the ones hunted. Our numbers will continue to fall. Maybe the next victim will be me. If you're lucky, it won't be you. But the fewer there are of us, the worse our odds are the next time. Anybody disagree?"

As long as that angel of death was tagging along, Shushou had no intention of rejoining the caravan led by the koushu.

"I've heard there's something inside every youma that's intoxicated by gems and jewels. I don't know if it applies to this one. Perhaps not. But we have sake and oil. If jewels don't work, maybe the alcohol will. The oil could be used in fire arrows."

Another murmur erupted in her audience.

"The tent poles are made out of bamboo. These could be fashioned into one of those

big crossbows used to defend castles."

"You mean a siege crossbow?"

"Yes, that. Those who don't have weapons can arm themselves with bamboo spears. We need to consider anything that might be effective against it."

"But—"

"This gallant band should be more than enough to do the job." Shushou forced a smile to her lips. "If we can only arrest its movements, we should be able to kill it."

The men exchanged nervous glances as Shushou surveyed her troops. "And we've got the perfect decoy. Me. Now, you wouldn't want to see a frail little girl come to a bad end, would you?"

Chapter 31

[4-8] **T**he humans called the youma a *shuen.* His upper body resembled a red-haired ape. The face alone was white, while his legs were a striking shade of vermillion. He had sharp fangs, and feet and claws that resembled those of a bird of prey.

And the keen intelligence to use those weapons well.

The shuen had taken over this particular region of the Yellow Sea. He usually hunted other youma and scoffed at their attempts to intimidate him, no matter how ferocious they otherwise might be. Consistently able to outwit any straightforward attack, he actually *enjoyed* tearing his victims apart.

Once he'd exhausted all the available game, he'd switch hunting grounds, periodically shifting his territory around the Yellow Sea.

Now and then some two-legged critters wandered into his domain. They were weak and small and rarely made for a satisfying meal, but he enjoyed ripping the fragile things to shreds.

Then one day, for whatever reason, a whole herd marched right past his nest. Slaughtering them all at once hardly presented a challenge. Besides, the corpses soon decayed. Picking them off one by one was more fun.

So he shadowed them, attacking the herd from the rear one day, circling around to the front the next.

He snagged one of the two-legged critters, dragged it behind a rock, tore off a few pieces, and took a satisfied nap. He woke up only to stuff the rest down his gullet. Not terribly filling but the taste wasn't bad.

When the hunger pangs again aroused him from sleep, he emerged from behind the rock and scanned the savanna. His eyes were drawn to the red dot of a fire. Where there was fire, the two-legged critters were never far away.

With a cackle of glee—an almost human laugh—he slipped away from the rock.

Shuen could cover the distance to the speck of light in three bounding strides. Except the moon was out. So he crept forward low and slow. The two-legged critters had smartened up of late. They didn't make it easy for Shuen to get close, scattering as soon as they spotted him. By the time he'd brought down one or two, the rest were out of reach.

Shuen crawled along the ground until he was almost on top of them. Though the firelight washed out his vision, he detected two or three of the two-legged critters sitting next to the fire. Turning his gaze back to the savanna, he couldn't make out any other prey close by.

To make sure, Shuen slightly raised his head and sniffed the air. No, these few were hardly alone. The rest were hiding. A great variety of odors wafted around him. Among them were unfamiliar smells, extraordinarily *delicious* smells.

His spirits roiled up inside him. Seeking to stifle them for the time being, he again slunk close to the ground. A little patience always made the reward that much more sweet. And something very sweet was surely waiting for him ahead.

Leveraging his front and hind legs, the red monster crawled through the bushes, as silent and slippery as a snake in the grass.

When he couldn't get any closer without being noticed, he pounced. With a single leap, he crossed the remaining distance, raking the two-legged critters with his talons a split second after his feet touched the ground right beside his prey.

A strange sensation and the sharp stinging in his claws make him pause to examine his targets. Planks bound together with hides. He'd been outfoxed. Shuen scowled and looked around. A pair of two-legged critters were beating a fast retreat, a big one and a small one.

He was about the attack when his attention wavered. That delicious aroma struck his senses. He could not rest until he'd ferreted out the source. The smaller of the two-legged critters flung something to the side. The contents spilled out of the container as it fell to the ground, casting off a glitter of light.

The nondescript container wasn't worth his while. The indescribable smell came from the small pile of objects spilled onto the ground next to it. He'd get right back to them after finishing off the two-legged critters. That would be the most fun. Except Shuen couldn't resist the enticing smell.

There'd be plenty of chances to hunt more two-legged critters. But he might never see one of *these* again. He'd never seen one before in his life.

Eyeing the small, fleeing figure, he inched forward. Some had an enchanting odor.

Delicious aromas came from others. Mixed in with them were ones that did nothing for him at all. He pushed his snout forward and pawed at them with his forelegs.

The scent only grew stronger, so rich he couldn't stand it. Ah, here was the source of the smell. Several of them.

They surely must taste as good as they smelled. The fragrance filled his mouth. He bit down. The fragrance intensified, penetrated the core of his brain and sent his thoughts reeling. The small, retreating figure vanished from his mind.

Shuen's hind legs lost their hold. He didn't care. He lolled onto his side as he combed through the mound with his forepaws. The next morsel he found was covered with a smelly, slimy substance, but he didn't care about that either. He popped it into his mouth and drifted off in a daze.

Bright red suddenly blossomed in front of him. Incandescent white assaulted his field of view. He couldn't see a thing. He didn't feel any pain. The good feelings persisted. His benumbed brain managed to conclude that this wasn't normal.

Before he could imagine *what,* he registered a hard shock in his side. The kind of thing that should bring him to his feet in response. His hind legs scooted out from under him. Barely managing to get to his feet, he still couldn't see a thing. His head spun.

His body took another blow. Waving his arms in a futile attempt to parry, he was hit—no, *stabbed*—again.

Something was stabbing him, thrusting and slashing. The dull, throbbing pain kindled inside him, not just where he'd been struck, but across his whole body. Once it did, it quickly grew to a scorching hot torture penetrating his legs, neck, back, eyes.

Shuen didn't understand what was happening, only that danger was upon him. He jumped at random, swinging his front and hind legs at his invisible attackers. If he connected with any of them, he couldn't tell.

He could hear nothing, see nothing but the blinding white light. His talons caught and dragged against a heavy weight. Trying to shake it free, he leapt and rolled and leapt again.

Black splotches peppered the veil of white before his eyes. The splotches grew larger. The pain intensified then receded. By the time it gave way to blessed relief, his eyes finally revealed to him the black world of the night.

The youma bounded away at a terrifying speed. Shoutan sprinted after it. Stumbling over the rocks and bushes, he caught his foot, tripped, and sprawled forward. He looked up to see the ball of fire bouncing into the distance, until it seemed to fall into the earth and disappear from view.

"Get it!"

Armed men ran up to him. Shoutan scrambled to his feet. The ground was

uncertain underfoot. His knees shook. But the trembling was nothing compared to when the red beast—a *shuen,* it had to be—first appeared.

With the shuen entranced by the jewels, the oil came in especially handy. The rampaging shuen made for an easy target when it couldn't keep upright. Except—

"Shushou-sama!"

Of all things, in one of its wild swipes the shuen's talons had hooked Shushou's cloak. Shoutan and the men hiding nearby took off after it, practically falling over each other as they raced through the early dawn in the direction they'd last seen the shuen.

The ground dipped down and slanted away. They came to a halt in a hurry. Thirty feet below them, something glimmered on a descending trajectory, like a ball rolling down a hill. The shuen was still on fire.

"She must be around here somewhere."

Or had been shaken off along the way. Shoutan crawled around looking for her. The sun finally rose, flooding the savanna with light. They resumed the search in earnest and were equally unsuccessful.

"What in the world happened to her?"

Shoutan sat down. One of his fellow searchers, an old woman, was hunched over a ways off. She straightened and called out. Shoutan jumped to his feet and ran over. She pointed to a cloud of dust headed their way. A group of at least ten kijuu came into view.

Shoutan stood there like a statue. A day earlier, how much more reassuring a development this would be. But they were a few hours too late, a few hours that might as well be a lifetime.

Part Five

Chapter 32

[5-1] **S**hushou opened her eyes.

She drew a breath and felt a fierce ache in her chest. But she was able to sit up so she couldn't be injured that badly. The only illumination in the dimly-lit cave came from high overhead.

"At least I'm alive," she said, staring up at the sliver of light leaking through the crack in the massive rock walls.

Although she spoke in barely a whisper, her voice echoed off the surrounding stone. She must be at the bottom of a fissure in the shoulder of the bluff. She could speak and see. It hurt when she moved, but she could move. Her injuries were confined to scrapes and bruises.

"That is a surprise."

When the youma, turned into a raging ball of fire, faced her and raised its forelegs, Shushou was sure she was finished.

On one side of the cavern, a big round boulder slanted down from the stone wall. Opposite it, two boulders piled atop each other to form a stepped slope. Beneath the slanting fissure formed by the two walls of rock, wisps of dead, dry grass had collected over the eons, forming a thick carpet over the damp earth. The space was a bit wider than Shushou could stretch out lying down.

She got to her feet, placed her hand on the sloping wall, and peered up. The crack in the ceiling was bigger than she'd thought at first. The protruding boulder continued without a break, meaning it emerged above the ground. Water running beneath the boulder had carved out the opening.

"Huh," Shushou exclaimed, and climbed the stone staircase. The boulders were smooth and mossy and dusted with dry grass but she made her way to the top without falling once.

She poked her head out of the hole and was bathed in warm sunlight. Right outside the hole, the base of the boulder was hollowed out like a big grinding mortar, the pit overgrown with weeds. Shushou grabbed a thick clump of grass and hauled herself out of the hole.

Lying on this circular patch of wild lawn, her spirits lifted. She looked up at the blue sky, took a deep breath, and stood up. She hoisted herself out of the depression and pushed through a thicket of bushes. The broad savanna reached out before her.

It was a scene she'd become well-accustomed to the past several days: the undulating land shimmering beneath the sun, parched patchworks of white rock and earth interrupted by great expanses of shrubbery and grasslands. Far in the distance she could make out the edge of a forest.

She scanned her surroundings and didn't recognize a thing. Not a human being. Not Kiwa's abandoned wagon.

What to do? Shushou thought as she clambered atop the big boulder. The apex formed a flat shelf of rock perched not very high above the savanna. From that vantage point, the wrecked wagon was nowhere in sight.

The youma had somehow snagged her with its claws and carried her off to who knows where. One sleeve of her kimono jacket was torn all the way up to the shoulder. So the youma must have caught her by the sleeve and taken her along for the ride until it ripped free.

She fell into the pit and tumbled down into the gap between the boulders and the earth. That was the only thing that made sense.

“What a stroke of good luck—for the time being, anyway.”

That stroke of good luck surely saved her, except that right now she had no idea where she was. Or where the rest of the Shouzan was—or rather, the servants left behind by those going on the Shouzan. Not to mention that she didn’t have any food or water. More reasons not to be so upbeat about the situation.

She tore a strip of fabric from the ripped sleeve and tied it to the bush. With the pitted boulder so marked, she decided to do a little scouting around.

“I couldn’t have gotten so lucky if that youma was still alive. It definitely must be dead.”

She was additionally fortunate that every other youma so feared the monkey demon they’d think twice about wandering about these parts. She could put worries about youma out of her mind for now.

Her shadow stretched out on the ground. She didn’t feel like she’d slept that long but evening must be approaching. After memorizing the shape of the boulder, she walked straight away from it. She still couldn’t see the wagon.

Any further and the boulder would sink out of sight beneath a knoll. She kept going until it was barely visible and using that distance as her radius, traced a wide circle around it. The wagon remained out of view. She tried calling out and craning her ears for a response. There was no answer, nothing like a human voice.

“I might be in more trouble than I thought.” She should go back to the road, if she had the foggiest idea where the road was. “Everybody always says when you get lost, you should stay right where you are.”

The problem was whether anybody was searching for her in the first place. She’d been carried off by the youma. It’d be logical for them to conclude that she was dead, give up, and keep going. That’s what they’d been doing so far. Anybody who went missing was considered long gone by the time anybody noticed. Sticking around waiting for them to show up was the dumbest thing they could do.

“I guess the only thing I can do is go as far as I can.”

She examined the arm exposed by the torn sleeve. Though it hurt, she wasn’t bleeding anywhere. The flesh wasn’t torn. More evidence that the youma’s claws had snagged only the fabric of her kimono. The beast carried her for miles like that. It was hard to believe.

If she could only get back on the road again she could surely catch up with the rest of the caravan.

“There’s nothing left for me to do but try.”

She nodded to herself. After making her way back to the big boulder, she piled up some rocks, stripped a branch from a nearby bush, and planted it in the rocks like a

flag.

“I should be able to keep this boulder in sight.”

As long as she didn’t lose sight of it, the cavern would never be out of her grasp. The bottom of the cave was damp enough that if she dug down, she might hit water.

Based on the position of the sun and the shape of the land, she started off in the direction that struck her vaguely as the most likely to yield results, counting her steps as she walked. With the boulder still in view, she heaped some rocks into another mound.

She walked further, gathered more stones and built another mound. By leaving these markers along the way, she could make her way back to the boulder. The shadows grew longer. The sun was setting. She built her fourth mound, her fifth, and walked as far as she could keeping the last one in sight—

And gave up. She must be headed in the wrong direction.

She trudged back to the boulder. This time she headed out along a line exactly opposite, doing the same thing she had before. And with the same depressing results.

The sun had set by the time she returned to the boulder. The gray veil of evening settled across the savanna. But she didn’t have a way of starting a fire and had nothing to eat or drink.

“If I abandon hope now, I’m dead,” she said aloud, doing her best to convince herself as she sat on the boulder and rested. She waited for the crescent moon to rise and set off walking again.

Searching for stones in the moonlight presented a vexing challenge, not to mention the difficultly in seeing the way ahead, which meant she had to build the mounds all the more frequently.

It was nighttime now and her current direction was yielding her nothing. Neither did her next attempt. On her third try, having walked as far as she could from the fifth mound, she spotted the outlines of Kiwa’s wagon off in the distance.

Shushou didn’t see any campfires and didn’t sense any people in the vicinity. “What a heartless crew,” she grumbled to herself.

But her steps quickened. She darted across the savanna, ran until her breathing grew ragged and her sides hurt. She stopped.

“Huh—?”

The only thing in front of her was an ordinary outcropping of rock, not a wagon. From where she was standing, there was nothing resembling a wagon in view. She whirled around, but the last mound had vanished into the darkness behind her.

“Oh, wonderful. Now I really am lost.”

Chapter 33

[5-2] **G**ankyuu looked at the silent, sullen men sitting on the ground. They were a crestfallen bunch, overcome by emotions that straddled the line between anger and despair.

Among them was a middle-aged man by the name of Shoutan. A member of Kiwa's retinue, he appeared to be the most profoundly discouraged.

Kinhaku took in the group with a vexed expression of his own. "It's been a whole day since the girl disappeared. We've spent all of today looking and haven't seen hide nor hair of her."

They'd spent the day searching along a line from the wagon and the fire—used to lure the shuen into the trap—to the sloping side of the bluff the shuen had last been seen racing down.

Before Gankyuu and the others arrived, the remnants of Kiwa's company had gone over the same ground with a fine-toothed comb. One man even continued down the side of the bluff. He soon caught sight of a flat shelf of rock. It hadn't occurred to him that the stumpy outcropping of stone might be hollowed out inside, or that a child could easily conceal herself behind one.

So he didn't walk around it but stood there and called out to her. Of course, she couldn't have heard him if she was unconscious.

So their focus turned back to the bluff. Supposing the shuen cast her off when it tumbled over the edge of the bluff, she would have fallen onto the hilly slope. It wasn't steep and was thick with bushes and tall grasses. They clawed through the undergrowth and turned up nothing.

"That means—" Kinhaku said, his voice trailing off.

"Please, go on ahead," Shoutan said. "I'll stay behind and resume the search tomorrow. Just leave enough food and water for Shushou-sama and myself."

"But—"

"When we were abandoned in this wilderness, Shushou-sama was the only one who came back for us. I cannot abandon her the same way we were. Heaven would never forgive me."

"He's right," several others quietly chimed in.

Kinhaku sighed and turned to Gankyuu. "Well, what do you think?"

Gankyuu jerked his chin at Rikou. "Ask him. He's the one footing the bill."

Now the center of attention, Rikou grinned. "Let's do this—we'll stay. Gankyuu and I began this journey with Shushou, after all. It was the three of us from the start. We'll

find Shushou and bring her to Mt. Hou. That was the plan all along, so everything will be back to normal."

When Shoutan raised an objection, Rikou interrupted him. "See, we have a haku and a suugu. As soon as we find her, we'll catch up with you soon enough. Go with Kinhaku and his men and drag your feet the best you can."

"Drag our feet?"

"Chodai and the others are itching to put as much distance behind them as possible. Slow things down a bit and we shouldn't get left too far behind."

"Yes, but—"

"Shushou will be okay. That little kid not only led all these people without a goushi in sight but went on a youma hunt to boot."

"That's right," Shoutan said proudly, prompting a smile from Kinhaku. Shoutan cocked his head to the side. "Though it sure was scary walking at night."

Kinhaku chuckled. "When moving through wide open areas, you always do it at night. If Gankyuu didn't clue her in, then she must have thought it up on her own. She has a good head on her shoulders. I don't think we need to worry too much about her."

He said to the rest of the seated men, "Speaking of which, lets make as much progress as we can manage before daybreak. Shushou will be safe in the capable hands of the shushi master. But with Chodai taking the lead and a rattled Kiwa racing to Mt. Hou behind him, our first priority is join up with them and pull back on the reins a bit."

Shoutan nodded at length. "All right," he said.

Around him people were getting to their feet. Kinhaku gave Gankyuu a relieved look. In reply, Gankyuu raised his hands and muttered in exasperation, "What a farce this turned into—"

"Shushi usually cross the Yellow Sea in small bands, don't they?" Rikou soothed him. "Just like old times, eh?"

"The old times never included bringing a couple of amateurs along for the ride."

"Since I'm the boss here, there's no point arguing about it. What do we do next?"

"Build a fire and take a nap. There's no sense looking for somebody except in the full light of day. If we're lucky, she'll see the firelight and saunter right up to us."

"I wouldn't bet against her doing just that."

Chapter 34

[5-3] **T**he remaining members of Kiwa's company left with Kinhaku and the goushi. Gankyuu and Rikou stayed behind. They slept resting against their kijuu—that had swapped owners—awoke at daybreak and made breakfast.

"Shushou doesn't have food or water. Would there be a watering hole around these parts?"

"If you dug a well, I suppose."

Rikou scanned the environment around them. "Considering the extent of yesterday's search, there's certainly nothing on that slope below the cliff."

Gankyuu cast him a puzzled look. "You are—how should I put this—an odd duck."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Who are you exactly? I never have gotten a satisfactory answer to that question."

"A simple traveler."

Gankyuu smirked. "What I thought you'd say. And why is a simple traveler so intent on finding Shushou?"

"What? You'd leave her behind?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

"You're a hard man, Gankyuu. But despite everything, right up to today, you've stuck with the caravan."

Despite everything, Gankyuu echoed to himself.

"When Shushou fired you, weren't you going to take off on your own and go hunting? Why are you still sticking around? The bellyaching notwithstanding, I think the girl's grown on you."

"Hardly the case," Gankyuu muttered. "I've got reasons of my own. When it comes to hunting, some place are better than others. Sticking around for the time being is simply more convenient."

"Is it? Well, I've got reasons of my own too."

Gankyuu said with a mighty sigh, "Listen, Rikou—"

Rikou grinned back at him. "That's crafty of you, Gankyuu, keeping your own true intentions close to the vest while conniving others to open up about theirs. Though if that's your strategy, you need to work on it."

"That's for sure," Gankyuu said with another sigh. "It's not like I care all that much about your true intentions. But—"

"But—?"

"I don't get you. Nothing you do makes a particle of sense."

"I'll grant you that. It probably doesn't."

"Now and then you come across as a perfect scoundrel."

"That's fine by me."

Confronted by Rikou's bright, smiling face, Gankyuu held his head in his hands in mock anguish. "You're the one who took a shine to Shushou and came all the way to the Yellow Sea. And yet, when Shushou ran off with Kiwa, you just let her go. That makes the two of you anything but a pair. You said you held your life too dear. I get that. Then why put your life at risk to go searching for her?"

"Where's the risk? Shushou hunted down the shuen." Rikou chuckled. "That girl is something else."

"With the shuen gone, more youma will be coming to fill the void. If you really valued your life, you wouldn't be wandering around here. You'd be hitching a ride with Chodai to Mt. Hou. Instead, you left the caravan and even swapped your suugu to go look for her. If she's worth searching for, why not go with Kiwa in the first place?"

"That's a problem of a different sort." Rikou smiled. An amiable smile, to be sure, though Gankyuu was beginning to think it belonged more on the face of a scoundrel.

"I met Shushou in Kyou. The fancy struck me so I helped her out. When I heard she was going to Mt. Hou, I somehow knew that if she made it to Mt. Hou, she would become empress. Perhaps the youngest in recorded history. Like I said, that's why I came."

"To see Shushou become empress?"

"Well, that's the boring way of putting it. To tell the truth, before Shushou was chosen, I was curious to see the Yellow Sea for myself and learn what kind of journey the Shouzan was."

"So that's what it comes down to," Gankyuu said with a sardonic smile.

Rikou laughed aloud. "Sorry, Gankyuu. Whatever you're thinking right now is probably wrong. I'm not a man motivated by such simple self-interests."

"Sure, sure. You've got reasons of your own."

"That *is* correct. I've got plenty of ulterior motives up my sleeve. As you said yourself, I'm a man who deals freely with suugu. I do not need an audience with an empress to raise my status or expand my wealth."

"Yeah, sure."

"But I did wish an audience with Shushou."

"Why's that?"

"Haven't I explained myself already? It wasn't my specific help that was critical in this equation. It was that she specifically happened to meet *me.* And because *I* was the one she happened to meet, rather than parting ways, I thought it'd be more interesting to forge a friendship out of that happenstance. *That's* what it comes down to."

"An explanation as clear as mud."

Rikou only grinned. "Sure. That's what I mean by having reasons of my own. But if Shushou *doesn't* become empress, my actions in that regard would be rendered meaningless. Whether to continue on with the koushu or join Kiwa seems to have

become a turning point as to whether Shushou will ascend the throne."

"If she isn't chosen, it wouldn't have mattered one way or the other to her."

"Like I've been saying, you've got that backwards. If she isn't chosen, then it has no meaning to *me.* I came to the Yellow Sea with a set of expectations concerning Shushou. Her ascending the throne will impart substance to those expectations. If she doesn't, it reduces them to a flight of fancy. I'm not about to lose my life to a flight of fancy."

"Now *that* makes sense."

"But I still don't think you get it. I'm speaking of duties particular to me alone. Like goushi charged with protecting those going on the Shouzan. The kind of thing that can't be cast aside on a whim. It is in the nature of such things that, once you have taken them on, the burden must be borne, no matter what. Don't you agree?"

"Probably."

"So if Shushou does not become empress, my own safety takes priority over hers. But if she does, then a slightly elevated risk is worth it."

"Nope, that doesn't make sense."

"I guess not," Rikou laughed. "Shushou stupidly quarreled with you and ran away with Kiwa."

"That was so stupid?"

"Idiotic! If Shushou is destined to be empress, then picking a fight with a shushi would be the last thing she should do. The safety of the liege takes precedence over his vassals."

"You do like to blather on."

"It's the logic of the world that we wish to be ruled by a sovereign. You may see Kiwa as a cold man for abandoning his retinue. But if he becomes emperor, then such means will have been necessary to the ends. Because the life of even a hundred of his subjects does not compare to that of the emperor, not when the fate of three million rests upon his shoulders."

"However true, it's still pretty loathsome logic."

"Is it? Does it not fall into the same category as the goushi and their employers? The goushi is willing to sacrifice others in order to preserve the life of his master. A world that requires each kingdom to have a master follows the same reasoning. Kyou has no master. If sacrificing a few hundred here saves the lives of tens of thousands later on, then so be it."

"It doesn't make the reasoning any less rancid," Gankyuu spat out.

"I'm not saying it isn't. That's the reasoning of a world in want of an emperor. And that's the reasoning a ruler in such a world must overcome."

"Eh?"

Rikou said with a wry grin, "It is the reasoning of the vassals who serve the liege.

He who sits upon the throne is not a vassal. The emperor makes the throne, not the other way around. The court jester remains the court jester no matter where he sits in the palace. And so it follows that the emperor must transcend the logic of his subjects.

Gankyuu pressed his hands against his temples. “I didn’t follow that at all. But—”

“But?”

“But I think I understand why you’d go looking for Shushou after she left with Kiwa and apparently survived. The ordinary goushi took the detour. Anyone who didn’t was a fool. But a goushi who didn’t take the detour—who stood by his master while hunting down the youma and securing the safety of the route for the rest—such a goushi would be exemplary.”

“Ah, what a splendid hypothetical.”

“Which is why you didn’t grab Shushou as soon as she left. You wanted to put her to the test. You wanted to see if she was indeed a *worthy vessel*.”

Rikou laughed. “I do love a good experiment.”

Chapter 35

[5-4] **S**hushou trudged along. At night she slept in the shelter of a boulder. At dawn she set off again, searching for the mounds and markers she’d left behind. Though like a cruel joke, doing so invited the likelihood she was only wandering further away from the road.

“What a fix I got myself into,” she mumbled to herself. “Whatever should I do?”

A shadow fell across her path.

She reacted before a conscious thought crossed her mind, dove for the cover of the nearest boulder and squeezed her body into the nook between the rock and the ground. Only after she’d hunched down did the possibility of an attack occur to her.

She heard a strange cry above her head and couldn’t help but look up.

She saw wings silhouetted against the sky. Nobody on the Shouzan rode a kijuu with wings. That big monkey must be dead. Other youma were flocking in to fight for its territory.

Rikou pointed out at the prairie. “Gankyuu. Look—”

Gankyuu followed his gaze and saw a pile of rocks. “A marker. Shushou’s?”

“Who else? See how logically they’re spaced out? How three of them together form a

straight line?”

Rikou came alongside one and pointed to the next. The three together formed a single compass bearing. He squatted down to take a better look and saw that the stones were stacked on top of each other. It wasn’t a natural formation.

“The markers stop here. She came from that direction and doubled back. One more and she would have come over the rise and seen the campfire.”

Gankyuu glanced over his shoulder. Behind them was the slope of the bluff. Climb it and the remains of the wagon and the campfire would come into view. Following the markers further down the slope, they found the first perched atop a boulder, unambiguously decorated with a bough from a nearby bush.

“This must be the starting point.” The markers radiated out in five directions from the boulder.

“The girl’s still got her wits about her.” Gankyuu caught sight of the nearby shrub. “Rikou.”

He darted around the thicket. The sleeve of a kimono jacket was tied to a branch. Gankyuu looked around and scooted down into the pit on the other side of the thicket. At the bottom of the depression in the rock was a small fissure. Gankyuu ducked down. It was too tight a fit for him to turn around but he got a good look inside.

“She in there?”

“No.” Gankyuu crawled out of the fissure and took in his surroundings. “But she was in there and climbed out. It had to be Shushou. An adult couldn’t make it all the way to the bottom.”

“Which way did she go?”

“Can’t tell. There aren’t any holes in there or in the prairie grass, so she didn’t dig for water.”

“How long could she survive without water?”

“Three days at most.”

“It’s been day already.”

“A child’s stride couldn’t have taken her far, providing a youma didn’t grab her.”

Shushou napped beneath a rock. Towards evening, she set off again. She was hungry, tired, and thirsty. It all added up to feeling completely rotten.

Being on her feet was better than lying down, though she wasn’t sure what to do, where to go, or even if she could find her way back to the cavern. The savanna offered no promising landmarks, only broad swaths of prairie grass and underbrush interrupted by pale earth dotted with boulders. The complete lack of unique features only added to her confusion.

Shushou picked up a stone and scratched a mark on the rock she’d sheltered under and placed the stone as high up as she could reach, then broke branches off a

nearby bush. This combination of signs would at least tell her if she started going around in circles.

She sighed. “I’m just going through the motions to make me feel better.”

Each time she stopped to rest, she pondered whether to keep sitting there and hope against hope that somebody would stumble across her or keep on walking. She kept on walking until she grew fatigued, at which point all that walking struck her as a stupid waste of her time.

I never should have left the cave in the first place. If nobody was going to find me there, they weren’t going to find me anywhere.

She said aloud, “Water under the bridge. I’m just going to end up hating myself.”

At this point, her only viable option was to make her way back to the road. Because of her empty stomach and the loss of her sleeve her legs weren’t eager to go along with that plan. The night breezes were cold.

Shushou tottered painfully across the savanna, her spirits dragged down by regrets and anxieties. Amidst her aimless wanderings, she’d slumped to the ground once again when she heard a human voice calling out to her.

“Hey!”

Shushou jumped to her feet and scanned the dark savanna.

“Hey!”

A man’s voice. Both joyous and on the verge of tears. Because someone had come looking for him.

The cry came again behind her and Shushou answered in turn. “Here! I’m over here!”

She ran towards the voice. Perhaps the lost man couldn’t hear her, for he only repeated himself. He sounded bewildered and alone. Maybe he’d run away with the monkey on his tail and like Shushou had lost track of the road. That’d be fine with her. Having a traveling companion would make hiking across the savanna that much more tolerable.

“Where are you? I’m here!”

“Where are you?”

So he must have heard her. Shushou glanced around as she ran. Despite her aching legs and how worn out she was, she felt like she was flying over the ground.

“I’m here!” she shouted as loudly as she could.

Far ahead of her, she caught a glimpse of a human silhouette slumped against a rock. He mustn’t have noticed her yet for his voice rang out from behind the boulder.

“Where are you?”

“I’m coming!” Shushou answered as she ran.

The man’s head popped up behind the rock. I’m here!”

She couldn’t make out his features from this distance. She didn’t recognize his

voice. He must be one of the monkey's previous victims, fleeing for his life and now lost, like her, in this empty wilderness.

"Are you alone?"

"Alone."

"I lost my way too."

"My way too."

The man raised his hand from behind boulder. The eyes in that unfamiliar face narrowed. He seemed to be smiling.

"Are you okay? You're not injured?"

"Not injured."

A gust kicked up. As if running into a strong headwind, Shushou slowed her stride.

"Um—you came with Shitsu-san?"

"With Shitsu-san."

The man didn't move from that spot, only peeked over the rock and thrust his arms in the air.

"What's wrong? What are you doing?"

"Doing?"

Shushou slowed her advance and stopped. She peeled her eyes. The man kept his arms raised as before.

"What—is your name?"

"What is your name?"

"You should already know that."

"Should already know that."

Shushou's next move was in the opposite direction. She slowly started to back away. "Hey, you belong to Shitsu-san's retinue, right?"

"Shitsu-san's retinue."

"So you'd know Shitsu-san's first name, wouldn't you?"

"Wouldn't you?"

Shushou retreated further. "You didn't forget, did you?"

"Did you?"

A cold chill ran down her spine. Shushou turned back the way she'd come, twisting her body to keep the boulder in her sights. His arms raised, the man only watched her.

"Hey!"

Something dreadful permeated the man's voice. She stumbled, tripped over her own two feet, and tumbled to the ground. The man poked his head over the rock and waved his arms. Shushou planted her trembling hands on the ground and tried to get to her feet.

The man moved his arms. And then he wasn't there anymore. He hadn't disappeared, Shushou realized a moment later. He'd jumped into the air, cleared the boulder—as tall as he was—in a single bound and landed right next to her.

"Hey!" said the human face, a human face without a speck of human emotion.

He was at least half human. The thick neck and bulging shoulders and long, burly arms. Scales covered the lower half of his body down to a pair of clawed bird's feet. Behind him the tail of snake thumped against the ground.

Shushou screamed. She instinctively raised her hand, then reached down and grabbed a handful of dirt and flung it at the face of the harpy. After that, a stone. She scooted backwards while hurling whatever she could lay her hands on.

She clambered to her feet and ran. The harpy caught her by the hair. She writhed desperately and managed to shake herself free and sprint away—right into the boulder.

She pushed herself off the boulder and dodged around it. The harpy jumped clean over Shushou and the rock. She tried to run but the thing had a hold of her head and dragged her back, lifting her feet right off the ground.

A big, vertical slab of stone was right in front of her.

At first, Shushou was sure the scream was her own. The stone charged forward. Her thoughts froze. She thrust out her hands. In the same instance a sharp blow sent her head reeling. She fell hard on her behind. But all she felt in that moment was blank amazement.

Another scream rent the air. The ground shook beneath her. She scooted against the boulder as a pale object tumbled out of the sky.

It took a long moment to realize what had happened.

The pale object was a well-muscled forearm, severed at the elbow. The same arm that had been holding her by the head. The youma had tried to swing her like a club against the charging stone but lost its arm first.

She raised her eyes. The harpy had its back to her. The creature writhed and swayed, its lashing tail smacking Shushou like a whip.

The harpy shrieked again. This time Shushou knew it didn't come from her. A bellow, a shout of anger that could well be taken as human. It crouched over, waving its remaining arm. The tip of a blade jutted out of its back. The blade appeared to grow out of the skin.

At the same time, somebody darted in from the side and dragged her to safety. She glanced up to see Rikou looking down at her.

"Ah—"

She'd barely savored the relief when the tail thudded against the boulder next to them, followed by the harpy's body slamming into the face of the rock, bouncing off and crashing to the ground.

“Hey!” The silhouette standing at the foot of the fallen youma called out to her. “You alive?”

Shushou tried to answer but couldn’t speak. She nodded.

“Heaven help me, but you really are the luckiest girl ever.”

She wouldn’t disagree, so nodded again.

“What’s the matter? Something wrong with your legs?”

He shook the sword, like flicking off dew, and tucked it into the scabbard.

“I really am the stupidest girl ever.”

Gankyuu only raised his brows.

“I was so frightened—”

Words failed her. The rest came out as a sob. She hugged her knees and buried her face in her arms. Heavy footsteps plodded up to her. Gankyuu reached down, grabbed her by the back of her collar, and hauled her to her feet.

“Stand up. We’re getting out of here.”

Very much like a wayward kitten, Shushou couldn’t help thinking. Her eyes opened wide.

“Gankyuu! Your leg!”

“Yeah,” Gankyuu said with a chagrined smile. “I screwed up. That thing took a piece out of me with one of its talons.”

Chapter 36

[5-5] **S**hushou couldn’t keep her voice from quavering. “A-are you okay?”

Gankyuu braced himself against the boulder. “Couldn’t say that I was with a straight face.”

He sank to the ground. His muddy-looking leggings were torn above the knee. The dark, damp stain in the fabric needed no explanation. Shushou noticed that he cradled his right leg when he sat down.

She knelt beside him. Looking closer, the torn leggings revealed a ragged gash in his thigh. Rikou crouched down next to her.

“Gankyuu—”

“Stop it. That tone of voice is making me depressed.”

Gankyuu ran his hand down his sprawled-out leg. The way he suddenly stopped betrayed how painful the wound must be to the touch.

Rikou turned to Shushou. “Shushou, remove his chaps and cut off the leggings.”

Rikou ran over to a nearby rocky outcropping. Shushou bent over Gankyuu’s leg. She took off the chaps. They were heavy and wet, as if soaked through with rain. She tried to roll up the leggings but they clung too tight around his calves. She tried ripping open the seam but the fabric was too tough.

“Here, let me,” Rikou said, having hurried back with the kijuu. Without a moment’s hesitation, he drew his sword and inserted the tip into the cuff of the leggings and in a single motion slit them up to the knee.

For a moment Shushou had to turn away. Like a dammed river filling a deep ravine, a fair quantity of blood pooled in the deep gouge in his thigh just above the knee.

“Can you move your leg?”

“I don’t know. It’s numb. Get me a piece of rope. And the haku—no, Seisai’s travel bag. The small one around his neck.”

Shushou stopped Rikou and went herself. She undid a loop of rope from pack in the back and tossed it to Rikou, then retrieved the small leather satchel draped across the shoulders.

Rikou cut off a length of rope and tied it around Gankyuu’s upper thigh. He removed Gankyuu’s scabbard. With the sword still inserted, he thrust it through the slack in the rope and twisted it to the side, tightening the rope into a tourniquet.

“You’re good at this.”

Rikou smiled. “Well, I know to do this much.” But his brows furrowed.

Shushou calling out and a man’s voice answering—Gankyuu was the one who recognized a harpy on the prowl. They split up and approached Shushou from her left and right. A step ahead of Gankyuu, Rikou took the arm off the harpy holding her. Gankyuu delivered the killing blow.

Rikou had watched as Gankyuu threw himself off balance. Not out of clumsiness, it quickly became clear, but to protect Shushou as the harpy lashed out with its tail in its death throes. Here was a man who traveled the Yellow Sea alone, a shushi as strong as they came. But in his rash effort to save Shushou, he had less room to spare than he thought.

Shushou returned cradling the satchel. “Gankyuu—are you sure you’re okay?”

“If a little scratch like this can do me in, I don’t deserve to be called a koushu.”

“But—”

“And yourself? How are you faring?”

“I’m fine. This time even I had to wonder if my luck was up. Thank you.”

Gankyuu looked up at her and said with a faint smile, “Even you, eh?”

“The way you swung that sword reminded me of nothing so much as chopping a limb off a tree. You really are an accomplished swordsman.”

Gankyuu got a bamboo flask and small bag out of the satchel. He was clearly taken aback by Shushou's compliment.

Shushou explained, "I've reconsidered my opinion of you."

"I appreciate it. Though you should thank Rikou. If he hadn't taken off the harpy's arm, that cute face of yours would be decorating the side of that rock right now."

Gankyuu emptied the contents of the bamboo flask into the wound and grimaced fiercely. From the smell, it must be alcohol. The small bag contained what looked like ash, which he next applied.

"Rikou did? I didn't expect that."

"Seems our bad boy here has a few aces up his sleeve. He did a good job hitting that harpy and missing you."

Rikou smiled. "We'd be in a world of hurt if I didn't have at least one such redeeming feature. A good thing that youma was a harpy. We heard the two of you talking. Weren't so sure we'd arrive in time when you screamed, but those markers you laid down made the difference. Pointed us right to where you were. That was pretty clever of you."

"I told you I was smart." Shushou smiled, then cocked her head to the side. "I'd never guess from looking at you, Rikou, but were you ever a soldier?"

"Well, a long time ago I did make a living at it."

"So that's why you have a suugu."

"*Had* would be the better word. I swapped Gankyuu for his haku."

Shushou gaped at him. "You did *what*?"

"I have suugu other than Seisai but not a single haku."

"You are an odd one, Rikou."

Gankyuu said, "Shushou, get me the water bag."

Shushou ran over to Seisai, got the water bag and hurried back. Gankyuu took it from her and said to Rikou, "What kind of packs are you carrying?"

"I had a goushi put them together for me in Ken. Pretty much the same as yours."

"Good. Get going."

"Gankyuu!" It wasn't Rikou raising his voice in protest, but Shushou.

"The little beasties will be smelling the blood and flocking here. I'll make do with that I've got here. I'm giving the suugu back to you."

"This isn't funny!"

"I agree," Gankyuu answered bluntly. "It very definitely isn't."

He applied a strip of foul smelling leather to the wound and wrapped an old cloth around it. Above Gankyuu's knee, not touching the wound, Rikou tied the section of rope he'd cut around the tip of the scabbard to hold it in place.

"Tell me the truth. Do you prefer the suugu or the haku?"

"I'd appreciate you leaving the haku."

“Understood.”

“Wait a second!” Shushou raised her voice again. “What are you talking about? You’re going to leave him behind? Don’t be ridiculous! I won’t stand for it!”

“Don’t take this the wrong way. If I thought for a second that my number was up, I wouldn’t be trying to get rid of you. Believe me, koushu aren’t the self-sacrificing type.” Gankyuu took a piece of bark or tree root out of the bag and popped it into his mouth. “Get out of here. I prefer being left to my own devices.”

“No!

“Keep your voice down. Seisai is skittish enough already. We’re going to have company pretty soon. I’m telling you, I’m fine. A wound like this is all in a day’s work for me.”

Despite the darkness of the night, Shushou could see the beads of sweat breaking out on his forehead. His was hardly the condition of a man who was *fine.*”

“Rikou, you pick him up. If Gankyuu can’t ride Seisai then you can get Seisai to carry him.”

Shushou grabbed his arm. He jerked it free. “You really don’t get it, do you? *Go.* My odds are that much better without you here. I’m not making a gallant sacrifice for you. Like I said, you’d be free to stay if I thought otherwise.”

Gankyuu tucked in his torn leggings and refastened his chaps. Shushou stood her ground. “And as *I* said, I’m not going to. I will either depart with you or stay here like an albatross hanging around your neck, hardly to be shook off. You choose.”

“I refuse both. Rikou, tie her up and haul her off with you.”

“No! I won’t allow you to treat me that way!”

Startled by her outburst, Seisai and the haku turned their heads and then looked up at the starry night.

“Ah. Our guests are taking their time. But they’re coming.”

Seisai raised his muzzle to the sky and growled softly.

Rikou asked, “What do you want me to do, Gankyuu?”

Gankyuu didn’t hesitate in the slightest. “Take her with you and leave.”

“What about you, Shushou?”

“I am not budging from this spot. If you want to run away, go right ahead.”

“Fine, then.” Rikou smiled. “What do you say we split the difference?”

Before Shushou could call him back or Gankyuu’s curses could reach him, Rikou jumped onto Seisai’s back and soared into the air.

“You two hold down the fort here,” he called down to them. “I’ll fetch the goushi.”

Chapter 37

[5-6] “**T**hat son of a bitch!”

Shushou said, “I don’t think this is splitting the difference so much as calling it a draw due to injury.”

Gankyuu raged at her, “What are you so calm about?”

“I’m here because I chose to be here. I’m not going anywhere. I’m perfectly happy to lie in a bed of my own making.”

“That’s why I—”

“You don’t know when to give up. Rikou is already gone. Factoring in the speed of a suugu at a full run, he should catch up with the goushi soon enough. We only have to hold out until then.”

“Do you think we can hold out until then?”

Shushou smiled. “We’ll be okay. I’m sure my good luck will hold.”

“It’s running out faster than you think.” Gankyuu held onto the boulder and hauled himself to his feet. “Bring me the haku.”

“That’s what you should have done from the start!” Shushou shouted back at him.

She grabbed the lead rope and pulled the haku to the boulder. The haku hesitated at first, stared at the sky and shook its head. When she handed the reins to Gankyuu, he mounted up, not quickly but still with a fair amount of skill. He reached down to her.

“Doesn’t your leg hurt?”

“I told you before. This isn’t that big a deal.”

So he said, though his right foot didn’t rest in the stirrup and there was no tension in his knee. The painkillers that kept most of the torment at bay left his leg numb and unresponsive. He pulled Shushou into the saddle and slapped the haku three times on the side of its neck.

Follow your instincts, the gesture meant.

The haku raised its head and set off at a gallop. Following a youjuu’s inborn instincts, it sprinted from approaching danger. It still had room to *flee.* Were a youma attack imminent, a haku would freeze in place instead.

The haku ran and glided off the ground. A slight tug on the reins brought it back to earth, where it was again once again given free rein. Unlike a horse, any kijuu worth its salt, even one the size and disposition of a donkey, had a knowledge of the Yellow Sea bred into its brain. That made all the difference in the world. They instinctually knew the best way to protect themselves from youma.

The flapping of wings behind them made Shushou start. Gankyuu clamped his hand over her mouth and quieted her down. Perched on the saddle in front of him, she

twisted her head, looked up at him, and nodded.

The haku followed the contours of the land, soaring over the low-lying areas. This flying style was not in its nature and was exhausting even for a haku. But this was the best way to stifle the sound of its footsteps.

Again came the flapping of wings, accompanied by menacing shrieks mingling high and low. Youchou were fighting each other over the prey.

The haku flew along the path taken by Rikou and the suugu, until it darted between an outcropping of boulders and veered off on a separate course. Cutting through a wide-open field and diving low over a brush-covered basin, they plunged into a rocky forest.

This is not good, Gankyuu said to himself.

The haku was trying to make its way to safety, the same as Gankyuu. That's why he'd wanted Rikou and Shushou to leave him behind. Except with Shushou with him, he couldn't very well bring her there too.

He had no choice but to pull back on the reins. Beneath the forest canopy, he calmed the balking haku and turned it in the opposite direction. Of course the haku was bewildered. The safe haven was right ahead and they were heading away from it. Gankyuu did his best to pacify the youjuu as they raced through the forest.

The haku made a flying leap. Gankyuu pressed Shushou flat against the haku's neck as the haku broke through the canopy into open sky. Beneath them, black shadows disturbed the branches.

"There's something down there."

"It can't fly."

The purple sky was growing lighter along the horizon. Flying was the worse possible option at this point but they couldn't set down now.

"Lie down," Gankyuu said, but he was too late.

Shushou said softly, "Gankyuu—look—" She raised her arm. "Wait. There are lights down there!"

She pointed. Beyond the forest, the dark shadows of the forest revealed the outlines of an encircling woods. The center of the woods rose up forming a small, double-crested mountain, the tops of which glimmered in the moonlight, bare as a monk's head. A light glowed at its base.

Not just one. There were at least three.

The haku ignored her and flew away from the grove. Shushou grabbed the reins and tried to halt the haku.

"Shushou!"

"Wait! There are buildings!"

Gankyuu clucked. "You're imagining things."

"I'm not imagining things. There's definitely—"

The haku sailed through the skies. The buildings at the foot of the mountain disappeared from view, but not the points of lights.

"You didn't see anything." When Shushou glanced over her shoulder at him, he added, "There was nothing there, okay?"

"Why?"

"Because if you insist that you did, I'm going to push you right off."

Shushou looked down despite herself. Here and there in the thinning forest, the tops of the slender trees shook back and forth. Something was tracking them along the ground. Even if they were safely alone, the fall alone would kill her.

"Then go ahead and push."

"Shushou."

"Coming meekly to heel after only being warned of the consequences is the behavior of a barnyard animal. As long as you're treating somebody like an animal, what difference does it make whether you push them off or toss them into the mouth of a youma?"

No sooner had Shushou shouted back at him but something flickered across his field of view. The haku neighed, an octave lower than a horse.

"What the—"

Searching the indigo sky, he caught a glimpse of wings streaking through the air practically within arm's reach.

The haku dropped like a rock, faster than Shushou had time to scream. The forest canopy rose up beneath them. At the same time, a sound like a rusty metal hinge screeched above them.

A raptor-like bird with two heads dove at the haku. Both mouths shrieked. The haku dodged to the side. The youchou cut through the air like an arrow, swooped around and rose toward them—only to meet the edge of Gankyuu's sword.

The haku neighed. Another shadow appeared in the early dawn sky. It had no wings but was galloping through the air.

"Damn."

Gankyuu swore aloud. He guided the haku over the hill below. Past a ragged promontory covered with boulders and underbrush, he set down middle of a grove of trees.

He dug a coil of black rope out of the saddle pack. The haku was carrying Rikou's packs. Grouping around by touch alone took him a long minute. A goushi would have stuck the rope in the shoulder bag.

"Undo the shoulder bags. The water too."

As soon as they touched ground, Gankyuu laid the haku down. Favoring his leg, he rolled off its back. He tied the black rope to the reins, hopped on one foot to a nearby tree, and tied the rope around the trunk.

“Gankyuu? I removed the packs.”

Gankyuu hopped back to the haku, took the packs from her. He glanced over his shoulder at the haku, stroked its neck and gave it a sympathetic pat.

“Got the water?”

“Yes.” Shushou nodded.

Gankyuu threw his arm around her shoulders. Using her as a crutch and dragging his leg behind him, they hurried along at a half-run, leaving the haku behind.

“Gankyuu—the haku.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it?”

Shushou looked back at where Gankyuu had tied the haku to the tree.

“Quit dawdling.”

“But—!”

It was a long, thin rope but was tied fast. The haku was still lying down as Gankyuu had ordered it to. Now it followed Gankyuu and Shushou with its eyes as they came to the bottom of the hill and grew further away.

“Gankyuu, the haku can’t run away. Whatever is after us—with it tied up like that—”

“It’s fine where it is.”

“You can’t be serious!”

“Remember how you said you were going to give the haku a name?”

She did, back when they first entered the Yellow Sea.

Gankyuu said, “Koushu don’t give their kijuu names. This is why.”

Chapter 38

[5-7] **G**ankyuu and Shushou ran as best they could, weaving among the rocks and underbrush, following the contours of the hill. Stumbling along, warily rushing from one shadow to the next, they still managed to maintain steady progress.

I hate this, Shushou thought.

She could hear the haku neighing far behind them and shook her head. If she could avert her eyes, couldn’t she avert her ears too? She might as well try. This was less about going forward than running away from the haku.

“Don’t cry, girl.”

“Leave me alone,” Shushou grumbled. The sight of that haku watching them run away was going to stick with her the rest of her life.

“Give things names and you start developing feelings for them. So koushu don’t give kijuu names.” But his own voice was hoarse.

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

“Go ahead and rail at me for being cold and heartless.”

Shushou glared at him. “Idiot. Nobody’s saying that.” She shifted her stance to give his arm a better hold around her shoulders. “It’s inevitable, right? We had to get away and that meant sacrificing the haku. If the sun rises by the time it takes for the youma to close in, we’ll be mostly in the clear. Staying with the haku and feeling sorry for him might make us feel better, but then we’d *all* end up dead.”

“So you do understand.”

“Don’t treat me like a fool.”

Shushou mopped her brow with her free hand. She picked up the pace as best she could. The sooner they were too far away to hear the haku’s cries the better.

“If anybody’s a fool, it’s the koushu. Not giving a kijuu a name kind of misses the point, doesn’t it?”

Answering the dubious expression on Gankyuu’s face, Shushou glanced up at him and said, “I mean, referring to your haku as *you* or *him* is more intimate than giving him a name.”

Gankyuu stared back at the tearful child. But with his mind focused on the more important task of flight, he didn’t answer.

In any case, he couldn’t tell her she was wrong. This made the ninth kijuu he’d lost. He couldn’t forget the number or the kijuu. A glimpse of another one like them brought all those memories to the fore. There were plenty of shushi who insisted on riding the same species of kijuu, no matter what. Gankyuu never owned the same kijuu twice.

Shushou said, “I’m sorry. This is all my fault.”

“What is?”

“You had to sacrifice the haku because of me. If I wasn’t here, the two of you would have made a beeline for those buildings. That’s why you wanted Rikou and me to leave the haku and go on without you, isn’t it?”

Gankyuu stared in surprise at his human walking stick.

“What wasn’t I supposed to see? I know you couldn’t go there because of me.”

Gankyuu remained mum. The truth was, he was breathing hard by now and trying to carry on a conversation was more bother than it was worth.

“If I took off, that is where you’d go, right? Do you think you could make it there on your own?”

Gankyuu stopped in his tracks. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that if you think you can make it there, then let’s go our separate ways.”

“Listen, you—”

Gankyuu slumped to the ground. There was a hollow beneath the ledge of stone. He rolled himself into it.

“Can you make it there? Then go ahead. I’ll raise a ruckus to draw the youma towards me while I’m waiting for Rikou to return. It’s worth a try.”

Gankyuu looked at the girl kneeling there, a strange feeling welling up inside him. “What in the world are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking I should take responsibility for having to sacrifice the haku. Just to be clear, you bear some responsibility too. You could have said something, like you had a safe haven where Rikou and I weren’t welcome. I certainly would have given an explanation like that all due consideration.”

Gankyuu couldn’t help a wry grin. “All due consideration, eh?”

“You weren’t honest with us. You keep your true intention so bottled up it’s hard to tell when you’re really speaking from the heart. I still might have believed you were only putting on a brave front. Those would be *your* chickens coming home to roost.”

“I see.”

“But I do believe I was in the wrong to insist on staying with you. The haku had to be sacrificed as a result. You both suffered because me. So to make up for it, I’ll be the decoy while you’re making your way there. Well, that’s what I was thinking, though right now you don’t look like you could make it.”

Gankyuu chuckled. “It looks that way to you too?”

“What if I went to that place and called for help?”

“Stop it. You’re more likely to end up dead than get anybody to listen to you.”

“Then I’ll help you get close enough. I promise never to say a word about it to anybody. What is that place?”

Gankyuu lay down and watched the sky brightening above the ledge of rock. “What did you come to the Yellow Sea to accomplish?”

“To become the next empress.”

“So be on your way. I’ll manage somehow.”

“As close as that place may be, you still need a shoulder to lean on, even my small shoulders.” She tilted her head to the side. “If I was a koushu, there’d be no problem with us going there together, right?”

“If you had any idea what it meant to become a koushu in the first place.”

Shushou sighed. “Do you know how insulting that is? It really ticks me off.”

“Huh?”

“You’re saying that a child like me has no clue about the hardships the koushu have to put up with.”

“And do you?”

“I can forgive you for making fun of me because I’m a child. I can forgive you for pointing out that I know relatively little about the Yellow Sea. But I can’t forgive you for insisting that I simply don’t understand how the big world works!”

“And do you?” Gankyuu jested.

The furious child glared back at him. “I have eyes, don’t I? And ears? Don’t you believe there are many things in the world that can be grasped if you only watch closely and listen carefully?”

“Are you claiming to have acquaintances among the koushu?”

“My family are wealthy merchants, well known even in Renshou.”

“I guess that makes you a genuine princess, eh? Not surprised.”

“Stop talking to me like that!”

Gankyuu held up his hand. “Keep it down, please.”

“Then stop saying such insulting things! Anyway, we’re wealthy enough to afford a large staff of live-in servants.”

Gankyuu gazed at Shushou’s flushed face.

“I wore silk kimono and attended the prefectural academy. My servant Keika wore a cotton kimono that was always dirty. I have no problem imagining what it means to work from sun-up to sun-down. Coming on this journey taught me that my imagination wasn’t far off.”

Two girls the same age, one living a life clothed in silk, the other living a life just to serve her.

“The live-in servants are itinerants too. They left the place where their family records are registered, lost their land and their vocations and their homes. With nobody to turn to or depend upon, they have to indenture themselves in order to eat. Their employers take care of the basic necessities but they can’t do a thing without a by-your-leave. My professors taught me that it’s illegal to buy and sell people, to own slaves. Live-in servants may not be called slaves but that’s what they are.”

Gankyuu’s attention didn’t waver.

“People see these refugees and itinerants—who can’t even put food on the table—and hire them because they feel sorry for them. The servants in turn repay that kindness by working for them the remainder of their days. That’s the polite fiction we all tell ourselves. Both parties know when they’re hired they’ll have a status little different than that of a slave.”

“I see.”

“In exchange for indenturing themselves, live-in servants give up their passports. Did you know that?”

Gankyuu nodded. A passport was issued by the government office in the prefecture where a person legally resided and was the sole means of vouching for his identity. If

he did not occupy his house and land for a period of seven years, he was declared legally dead and the land was confiscated. But by producing a passport, he could return home and file a claim for compensation. At the bare minimum, he could appeal to the prefectural government for support.

The majority of refugees gave up their passports for reasons that came down to trading uncertainty for security or peace of mind, as in the case of child sold to a koushu guild master. As a result, refugees were also known as "undocumented."

"Giving up a passport is essentially a pledge not to run away. When a parent becomes a live-in servant, so do his children. They go to work when they are still young. They won't attend school, and if they have a passport, it will be confiscated. When they become adults, they won't be registered on the census and won't receive a homestead, making it difficult to pursue an independent life. They can't get married and can't have children. Their only hope for a reward comes from working for their master. And because the master doesn't want them saving money and running away, he won't pay them in cash, only in kind, and the bare necessities at that. When they grow old, because they are not registered on the census, they cannot retire to a *rike.* They'll work until the day they die and get buried in a potter's field."

Gankyuu silently nodded.

"Keika won't be free until my father dies. Even when he dies, if my mother is still alive, she will inherit the live-in servants along with the rest of the property. Keika will remain a live-in servant until my mother dies and no one is left to inherit and the household is forfeited to the kingdom."

"Except such forfeitures hardly ever happen."

"That's right. Under the guise of compensation, my father will distribute the assets of the household and company to my eldest brother. When my father dies, in the eyes of the law, he will be a penniless old man living off the charity of his children. There will be no estate—or servants—left to forfeit, it having been divvied up among the children."

Gankyuu nodded again.

"I can't claim any koushu as my close acquaintances. But being raised by servants meant being raised by refugees. I always thought it strange that I should be given such beautiful silk while Keika was not. Why couldn't Keika and I eat the same meal at the same table? And how was it that our meals, prepared in the same kitchen, were so very different? Why couldn't Keika live in the main wing of the house with me? Even though I've never been a refugee or itinerant, nobody can tell me I don't understand their lot in life."

"Of course."

"Though I don't get the koushu to that extent, I understand that instead of trading their freedom for the safe and secure jail cell of a family estate, the koushu choose to

live free in the Yellow Sea. Servants and koushu start out refugees. On the one hand, there are those who grovel to the master of the house, trying to shed the stigma of a refugee and rise in respectable society. On the other, there are those who shed respectability and take on the name of *koushu no tami.* As for me, I'd take that red passport over the patronage of any lord of the manor."

"But you are going to Mt. Hou in order to become empress."

"That I am. That's why I'm here. But if I can't be empress then becoming a koushu is good too. You know, there's nothing wrong with being a shushi either."

"So empress on one side of the scale and koushu on the other."

"What's the problem with that? Don't you know? Emperors and empresses don't have census records either."

Gankyuu grinned. "Koushu like me don't need either."

Gankyuu was born in Ryuu. Driven out of the kingdom by civil strife, his parents were stricken from the census records. They relocated to En, except that the Kingdom of En existed for the people of En and the refugees were left to observe the lives of its blessed subjects while sleeping at the side of the road. They could hope for no land or children of their own. As vagrants, they were cut off every aspect of society.

"The emperor can do nothing for us. On the other hand, if there is no land to be had, no place to call our own, then we have no need of an emperor. And if Kyou goes to the dogs, there is nothing left for us to do except to say goodbye and wish her good luck."

"I suppose so."

"What does this world really need with an emperor? When an emperor strays from the Way, calamity awaits. I say they should lock them up. Permanent house arrest. Let the government grind to a halt. Sure, things may not improve, but they won't get any worse."

Shushou tilted her head to the side, as if trying to shake free some meaning from Gankyuu's words.

"Does the benevolence of the kirin save any lives? Anybody can feel sorry for somebody else. If that's all the emperor and kirin are good for, who needs them? All that matters in the end is resolving to live your own life and rejecting a kingdom's handouts. People long for an emperor out of habit. They subjugate themselves before the emperor the same way refugees beg for mercy from the lord of the manor."

Rejecting the rule of the emperor, repudiating the will of the Lord God Creator, the koushu were subjects of the youma and their home was the Yellow Sea.

"You can't long for an empress and be a koushu, Shushou."

"Don't be silly," Shushou laughed. "I don't long for an empress. I want to *be* empress. Hardly the same thing at all." She looked up at the brightening sky. Dawn was breaking. "It's getting light. Shouldn't we be on our way? Or do you want me to

leave?”

Gankyuu got to his feet. “Lend me your shoulder,” he said.

“Will you be okay?”

“I should be able to hold out till we make it there.”

“There—”

Gankyuu raised his face to the sky. “The koushu village.”

Part Six

Chapter 39

[6-1] **T**hose who entered the Yellow Sea could not leave until the following solstice or equinox. They slept under the stars. If they got injured or sick, all they could do was cower beneath the shade of a tree.

The koushu village was said to have started a long time ago. Shushi and goushi—every different kind of koushu—journeyed into the Yellow Sea to hunt beasts, forage for plants, or prospect for gems. They sought out sanctuaries in advantageous locations and collected stones and bricks for underground bunkers as a defense against the youma.

The koushu had no place to call their own. Most didn’t have a home or a permanent address. In time, there emerged koushu who wished to settle down. They joined forces and began to build towns in the Yellow Sea.

“But those aren’t real towns. They don’t have a *riboku,*” Shushou said as she propped up Gankyuu.

“They didn’t at first.”

“At first?” Shushou said with a surprised look.

“Do you know how riboku spread?”

“No. I’ve never heard an explanation.”

“Supposedly they’re all grafts. Only a cutting from the riboku in the Imperial Palace will suffice.”

Each imperial palace was home to the mother tree of that kingdom, not only where a child of the emperor grew, but also where new fruit appeared when the emperor successfully petitioned for new domesticated plants and animals. The branch bearing that fruit could be cut off and replanted, thus creating new riboku, though only in that

kingdom.

“Huh.”

“The koushu wanted a riboku of their own. If there was a riboku in the Yellow Sea, then children born from it would truly be citizens of the Yellow Sea.

“Are you telling me they stole one from the Imperial Palace?”

“What palace would they steal it from? The Yellow Sea belongs to no kingdom.”

“But—”

“The pleas of the *koushu no tami* were heard and the God of the Koushu granted them a riboku.”

Or so the legends claimed. Kenrou Shinkun, the guardian saint of the Yellow Sea, petitioned the Lord God Creator and the Gods of Gyokkei and received twelve cuttings, which he gave to the *koushu no tami.*

“I don’t believe it.”

“You don’t believe it?”

“My professors told me that gods don’t exist except in people’s imaginations. Anyway, that’s just folklore and fairy tales, isn’t it?”

“Who’s to say? The koushu all believe it. That part of the story couldn’t be more than three or four centuries old.

“Did that riboku take root?”

“Yes. When Shinkun gave the koushu those cuttings, he told them not to tell anybody else about them.”

Shinkun petitioned the Gods and gave the koushu the branches he received, but the Gods were not altogether pleased with the arrangement. As a consequence, the blessing came with a curse. An ordinary riboku could not be killed by youma or natural disasters or humans. But the riboku of the koushu would die if touched by anybody who was not a koushu.

“So that’s why you didn’t want to bring Rikou or me there.”

“That’s not the only reason. If it became widely known that there were towns in the Yellow Sea, people would flock to them. Not only those going on the Shouzan, but anybody coming to the Yellow Sea for whatever reason. If that happened, at some point somebody would kill the riboku. It’s human nature.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Besides that, no ruler of any kingdom takes kindly to the thought of people living beyond his control. We don’t accept the protection of any ruler. In exchange, no ruler taxes our labor or our wages. It’s easy for people to close their eyes to fact that we take nothing from any kingdom and despise us as a bunch of tax-dodging loafers and laggards. They’d be doubly upset to learn these *dog’s tails* got their own riboku.”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t be surprised if some of them would kill the riboku out of spite. It really is too bad.”

“That’s why nobody but the koushu can enter a koushu village. We pledged to protect our covenant with Shinkun, to keep secret the existence of the koushu villages, even if that means killing anybody who stumbles across one.”

“So I wasn’t supposed to see what I saw.

Gankyuu nodded.

The riboku in a koushu village was not a hardy tree. But it would produce children. Their social standing and the kingdom of their birth was irrelevant. If their petition was answered, a golden fruit would grow on the riboku. No matter how small and misbegotten, a village with a riboku was that koushu’s birthplace.

Outside the Yellow Sea, there’d be no end to the persecution and prejudice that came his way. But here was a place where somebody would always have his back, a place he’d be proud to call his own. Even if such a man never set foot in the Yellow Sea and never laid eyes on his village again, no matter how despised and feared it might be, his hometown would always be there in the Yellow Sea.

“Koushu who want a child go to the Yellow Sea and petition the riboku. The child will live with his mother in the village until he’s old enough to be trusted with the secret of his birth. During that time he’ll study at the feet of the guild master.”

Shushou chuckled. “Those of us who live outside the Yellow Sea have never seen a true koushu child. They really are *youma no tami.* Like the youma.”

Gankyuu smiled. “I suppose that’s one way of looking at it.”

He wasn’t loud but he’d grown awfully talkative. Shushou didn’t have to guess why. He was leaning heavier on her shoulders. His feet were beginning to drag. The color was draining from his face. His words were clumsy and indistinct. He was slowing fading away. Talking was his way of holding onto consciousness.

Shushou raised her head. What were these big trees soaring here and there out of the forest floor? Big, dark, oak-like leaves sprouted at the ends of twisted branches. Between the branches she could make out the hazy outlines of the mountain with the twin knobs.

She wasn’t sure they’d make it there by evening, or whether she could keep Gankyuu upright the whole time. Every time they stopped to rest, she loosened the tourniquet around his thigh and checked the bleeding. Perhaps it’d slowed down a bit, though she couldn’t say it had for certain.

“Does it hurt?”

“No. Compared to refugees, the koushu are a lucky lot. They will never die abroad. Even if a koushu’s corpse is cast into a potter’s field, that red passport guarantees his return to the Yellow Sea and his burial in a koushu village.”

“Stop it. Now’s not the time to go jinxing us. By the way, what kind of place is Ryuu?”

“I remember it was cold.”

“So is Kyou,” Shushou quipped. And he was cold now. Gankyuu’s arm on her shoulders was cool to the touch.

It’d take several men linking arms to ring the trunks of the great trees around them. Despite their massive size, the treetops hung low to the ground. The big leaves formed a dense, green canopy that turned the ground into a shadowed twilight.

Thick roots thrust out of the ground, as if pushing the trunks into the air. Slender hair-like roots hung down like bamboo screens. Thicker ones stretched across the pale brown ground and entwined with those of their scattered siblings. They welled up all around them, lifted and twisted skyward like threads plucked by the fingers of giants.

Navigating this arboreal maze, the slightest stumble could break a man’s leg, all the more so when that man was nursing an injury like Gankyuu’s. The low canopy spread out horizontally over their heads. Where the branches of one tree touched another, noonday sky, narrow bands of sunlight slanted through the treetops.

Shushou caught a glimpse of the blue, noonday sky. A shadow grazed her view.

She immediately pushed Gankyuu to the ground between the tangle of roots. Clinging to the root above her head, Shushou looked up. It wasn’t a bird. It wasn’t a suugu. It didn’t appear to be any of the kijuu the goushi had brought with them.

“That’s a *san’yo,*” came Gankyuu’s hoarse whisper.

A flying snake twice as long as a man was tall. Flapping its four wings slowly, slithering its torso back and forth, it swam through the air. The sight sent a chill down Shushou’s back.

She stifled the urge to bolt and squatted down among the roots. The san’yo swam through the air and circled back. It passed right above her, close enough that she could make out the scales on its body and count its three legs. Right when she thought it was going to keep on going, it turned around.

The thing was in no hurry to leave. Cruising lazily back and forth, its belly brushed the surrounding treetops, raising a sound like gravel scraping on glass.

“It smells blood.” Gankyuu’s stifled voice was barely audible. “It smells *me.* Shushou, get out of here.”

“No.”

“This is the same thing as the haku. Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s not at all the same thing. If I was a haku, I would have escaped with you and *your* haku. Unfortunately, I’m a human being.”

“Aren’t you going to become a koushu?”

“I am. But to do that I need a guild master to guide me.”

“Koushu don’t throw away their lives for no good reason. They always chose the best means to ensure the longest life. A sacrifice made under those conditions is no sacrifice.”

“Then too bad I’m not really a koushu.”

No sooner had she spoken but a sound rang out very close by. Shushou felt the blood drain from her face.

It came from the vicinity of a big mound, one of the tree trunks held aloft by the great tangle of roots. A face poked out from among the roots strung across the face of the mound. The head of a wolf covered with red hair but as big as a tiger. Shushou clearly sensed its black eyes locking on hers.

Gankyuu grasped the scabbard bound to his right leg as a splint. “Crawl under the roots there.”

“But—”

Before she could finish that thought, Gankyuu grabbed her by the head and shoved her down. He drew the sword with great difficulty. This youma was probably a *kasso.* It stared back at Gankyuu, not budging an inch.

Branches snapped over their head. The san’yo circled lower and lower.

His hand around the hilt had hardly any strength left in it. He might have a fighting chance if he only had to worry about the san’yo. But there was the kasso barely a few arm lengths away.

“Shushou, stay there and don’t move. Tuck yourself into a ball and don’t make a sound. If it gets quiet up here, run. Sorry about this, but give my red passport to Kinhaku.”

“That’s not funny!”

A wounded older man on the one hand, an otherwise healthy young girl on the other. Right now, the best odds lay with the girl. That was the way the koushu saw things. According to that logic, had fate dealt the cards the other way around, Gankyuu would be more likely to survive, meaning he’d be leaving Shushou in the lurch instead.

But given the present circumstances, there wasn’t any debate about who had the longest life ahead of her.

Gankyuu raised the sword—or just barely managed to as he searched for a foothold. He took a step forward. At that moment, he heard again what sounded very much like a bird call. It didn’t come from the kasso or the san’yo, but from a completely different direction.

Not another one, Gankyuu thought, sinking to his knees.

As if unleashed by the bird call, the kasso leapt up from between the roots. Faster than Gankyuu could swing his sword, the kasso vaulted into the sky, broke through the branches, and made a beeline straight for the san’yo.

Chapter 40

[6-2] **S**hushou crouched down next to Gankyuu. “What?” she blurted out. “Why?”

Had a new predator arrived, fierce enough to make a kasso take flight? Gankyuu glanced around for this new enemy. He saw nothing, only heard a wail like a sudden squall. The threatening cry of a san’yo, Gankyuu knew. The high-pitched roar of the kasso followed soon after.

The kasso clamped its jaws around the flying snake’s neck. The san’yo lashed back and forth in vain.

Shushou and an equally dumbfounded Gankyuu watched the fantastical scene unfold. Youma fought over food and territory all the time. But not when there was blood in the air and prey right in front of their eyes. *After* the game had been brought down, perhaps. A youma never chose to fight instead of feast.

Sunlight flashed through the leafy branches. Drops of rain drummed against the leaves. A dark red rain. Next came the writhing san’yo and the kasso, sinking its teeth deeper into the neck of the struggling snake.

Its scales glittered in the scattered sunlight. The kasso stepped on its wings and jerked its head to the side, tearing off the san’yo’s head. The long, reptilian torso whipped back and forth. And suddenly grew still. Aside from an occasional twitch, it was quite dead.

Devouring the scaly head, the kasso cast a brief, backwards glance at Gankyuu. Lit up by a beam of sunlight, the bands of reddish brown fur around its head and shoulders turned into translucent tongues of flame.

The kasso lost interest in Gankyuu and returned its attention to its meal. Beneath its feet, the san’yo twitched again, casting off flashes of light.

It was Shushou who prodded the gaping Gankyuu. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Ah.” Gankyuu nodded, still in a daze. But it was a soft neigh that brought him back to his senses. That bird call—and now this neigh—that sounded an awful lot like his haku. He couldn’t help looking around for the source.

“Gankyuu—”

Shushou pointed at the kasso, finishing up the san’yo. Past the column of sunlight, a human figure appeared in the forest. A horse—an animal that looked like a horse—was with him. No, it was undoubtedly the haku, still wearing its saddle and packs.

The man was holding the reins and leading it towards them, his face was lost in the green shadows.

“A human being?” Shushou said aloud. One of the *koushu no tami.* It had to be. A quiet physique too slender for a man, too rugged for a woman, showing not the

slightest sign of fear or horror at the grotesque scene before them.

It wasn't Rikou or one of the other goushi. He was wearing a shawl. What did they call it? All the goushi used them as scarf and windbreaker. The shawl wrapped around his head and shoulders. Between the layers of fabric she could make out hard lines and sharp shadows. Armor, perhaps?

Leading the haku along, he passed by the kasso without the slightest reaction. He stepped over the long, limp tail of the san'yo. For a moment, the column of sunlight revealed a young and gentle face.

Gankyuu and Shushou stood there in awed silence. He walked up to them. "Is this haku yours?"

His voice was young too. Gankyuu nodded. The slender man—more a teenager—held out the reins to Gankyuu. His actions remained calm and collected throughout. The haku, on the other hand, bobbed its head energetically. The reins slipped through Gankyuu's fingers. The haku instead lowered its head and rested its muzzle on Gankyuu's shoulder.

When Gankyuu was training him, this was how the haku sought his approval. Gankyuu patted him on the neck. "Good boy. Good boy. Nice to see you safe and sound."

Whether or not the haku understood he'd been abandoned, he affectionately rubbed his muzzle against Gankyuu's shoulder. Gankyuu stroked the smooth curve of his neck. Bathed in the soft green light, the haku's coat cast off a glossy sheen.

"Are you one of the *koushu no tami*?" He asked the question in the same soft voice, with no note of reproach.

Gankyuu nodded. "Greatly appreciated. Did you rescue the haku?"

"It was tied with a black rope, so I assumed the owner was on the run from a youma. I see you are wounded."

"Ah, that." Using the sword as a cane, Gankyuu let go of the haku and slumped to the ground. "As you can see, you saved our necks as well."

"Um," Shushou said. She pointed at the feasting youma. "Isn't that a youma? Should we just stand here chatting? Or is that your kijuu?"

The boy shook his head. "Not a kijuu. Call it an acquaintance."

"A youma is your acquaintance?"

"Well, more or less."

As they talked, Shushou got a better up-close look at him. He wasn't much older than herself.

He asked her, "Are you a koushu too?"

Gankyuu said, "*No* is the best answer to that question."

"I don't suppose you could help us out here? We'd be really, really grateful."

"Sure," he said without any prevarication. "With all the bloodshed, we should get

moving." He reached down to Gankyuu. "That leg of yours, you should saddle up. I'll show you to a safe place."

As he pulled Gankyuu to his feet, a gap opened up in the shawl wrapped around his shoulders, Shushou gaped at the sight of the antique armor beneath, yet finely made and in good condition. The string of gems hanging across his right shoulder to his left side sparkled with a clean, clear light, casting off a rainbow of colors as he moved. Stranger still, this beautiful jewelry didn't appear at all ornamental.

A shawl woven with gems—

Shushou raised her eyes and examined the side of the boy's face with wide eyes as he helped him into the saddle.

Gankyuu extended his hand and then stopped, the look on his face little different than Shushou's.

Chapter 41

[6-3] **S**hushou posed the question to herself over and over: *You can't possibly be—* She couldn't bring herself to say the words aloud.

Gankyuu rode on the haku. The boy walked alongside him holding the reins. Shushou reached out and hesitantly took his free hand. He only glanced over his shoulder, didn't shake her off, but clasped her hand with his, a warm and gentle grip.

He looked like an ordinary young man, though the way he carried himself hinted of the warrior within. He strode through the forest without the slightest wariness or concern. At first, Shushou was sure he was headed for the koushu village. Instead he returned to the hill where Gankyuu had abandoned the haku.

Winding around the hill and pressing through a thicket at its base, they came upon a narrow creek and followed it upstream. The sun was setting when they entered a rocky area and made their way to a spring bubbling out of the rocks. A copse of gnarled pine trees clung to the adjacent boulders.

The spring was a step down from the stone table. The boughs of the pine trees almost completely closed out the sky above.

He tied the haku to a stake wedged into a crevice in the rock and turned his attention to a hearth beneath a small ledge of stone.

What an ideal place, Shushou thought. *He must come here often.* He moved about with a natural sense of familiarity. Her mind astir, she watched as he built a fire from

the pine needles and dead branches he'd gathered along the way.

Being wise to such a safe haven indicated his deep knowledge of the Yellow Sea. Except not only knowing of such of place, but visiting it often, wasn't the kind of thing the typical guardian did.

I don't believe it. You can't possibly be— She still couldn't give voice to her question from before.

In the dusky grove, beneath the pine trees, the twilight came all the quicker to the spring. The pleasant breezes stilled. Shushou at last commanded herself to move. Petting and reassuring the haku, she removed the saddle and travel packs, brought it to the spring to drink, then opened the feed bag and spilled some out on the ground.

"I'm so relieved." She wrapped her arms around the haku's neck as it bent down to eat. She really was grateful it was safe. She hugged the warm haku and said so over and over in her heart. Hot tears stung the corner of her eyes. She rubbed her face against the haku's fur.

She glanced over her shoulder to see Gankyuu sitting slumped against the stone wall blankly watching her and the haku. She ran over to him.

"Are you okay? Does it hurt?"

He managed a smile. "Stings a bit."

"There's no need to fib. That must hurt like the blazes." The boy's very human tone of voice confused Shushou all the more. "Miss, the wound needs to be cleaned. Draw some fresh water."

Shushou bobbed her head, wrung what remained out of the leather water bag and filled it from the spring. Setting it down, she took hold of Gankyuu's hands and helped him to his feet. Coming to a standing position, he glanced at the boy, who was tending to the fire.

"Shinkun—"

The boy glanced back at him, only waiting for the rest of the sentence.

"Thank you. For the haku too. Much appreciated."

"Give your thanks to Heaven. You are simply the beneficiaries of very good fortune."

Shushou scrutinized him as best she could without staring. Gankyuu called him *Shinkun* and he'd responded.

"Kenrou Shinkun," she said aloud.

Squatting next to the fire, Shinkun turned his attention to her.

"But you look like an ordinary human being."

He laughed a very human laugh. "I don't recall ever being anything but. Here, let me help you."

He lent Gankyuu a shoulder. Shushou followed them to the spring. They sat Gankyuu down. Shushou took off his boots and chaps, undid the dressing around the wound and washed it off.

“I never thought,” Gankyuu mused, “that Shinkun was a real person.”

“Well, if you don’t consider wizards people then you would be correct. I am a simple *Tensen,* a wizard of Heaven.”

“A Tensen.”

“Like a *Hisen,* a wizard of the air. They live a little longer than most but are by birth never anything but human.”

“Huh,” said Shushou. “Do you serve the gods of Gyokkei?”

“Good question, that.”

“Then you don’t?”

“Enough of the third degree,” Gankyuu interrupted.

Shinkun only reacted with a small smile. “Tensen do not, as a rule, interact with humans. So perhaps we should stick to the matter at hand and avoid unnecessary tangents?”

“Oh. Sorry.”

Shushou apologized and concentrated on Gankyuu’s leg. She washed away the dried blood with a wet cloth. *Amazing,* she thought to herself. If Shinkun was a human being, then maybe the rest of the Gods were too. And somewhere there might be a real Gyokkei, a kingdom where they all dwelled.

“There are more mysteries in this world than I would ever have imagined,” she mumbled aloud. She said to Shinkun, “This okay? Oh, I mean, do you think that is all right?”

Shinkun said with a wry smile, “Don’t fret the formalities.

He bent over Gankyuu leg. Gankyuu was rooting through one of his travel packs for something. Shinkun stopped him and took a small bamboo flask from the bag attached to his armor at his waist.

“Do you have a fresh cloth there?”

Shushou hurriedly got a clean hand towel from the pack. He poured some of the liquid in the flask onto the towel and applied it to the wound. He capped the flask and handed it to Shushou.

“Take this. Have him drink some if it starts to hurt too badly. There’s not a lot but it should tide him over until the wound heals.”

“Um, what—” *is this,* she was going to ask. He spoke first.

“You don’t appear to be a koushu.”

“Well, I’m not. I’m going to Mt. Hou.”

Bandaging Gankyuu’s leg, Shinkun glanced over his shoulder at her. “You?”

“Yes, me. Gankyuu is a shushi. But I, um, had him come with me as a goushi.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

The blunt dismissal could help but get Shushou’s goat. “I am fully aware of how ridiculous that might sound.”

“Why would a child like you think of going on the Shouzan in the first place?”

“Because I thought myself a worthy vessel.”

“Shushou,” Gankyuu chided her under his breath. She paid him no heed.

“You certainly aren’t lacking for self-confidence.”

“My professors taught me there was nothing wrong in believing in yourself.”

“And pride goeth before a fall. Would you even understand what being empress involves?”

Shushou felt the blood rushing to her cheeks. “What’s that supposed to mean?” Koushu and wizards, they were one and the same when it came to this subject. “I’ve had it to here with this attitude that I can’t comprehend something because I’m a child! Do you think I would have come to the Yellow Sea in the first place if I didn’t know what being empress involved?”

“And with that knowledge in hand, you thought yourself capable of becoming empress?”

“Yes. What, you don’t see it?”

“In any case,” Shinkun said, eyeing her coldly, “you’re going to have to make your own way after this. Just to let you know, there are already youma headed this way. They won’t attack as long as I am here. But as soon as I leave, they will, without a doubt, make their way up here.”

Shushou glared back at him. “I’m not surprised. Become a wizard and you lose your humanity.”

“The throne is not a child’s plaything, not furniture you sit on but a burden you must bear. If you truly comprehended the responsibilities and obligations of a ruler, you would be the last one to claim yourself as a worthy vessel.”

“I do comprehend. The burden the emperor must be bear is the kingdom itself and the lives of every one of its subjects. Simply choosing between two equally compelling options can mean that ten thousand will die on the other hand and ten thousand mourn on the other.”

“And you’re saying you could correctly make such decisions?”

“Of course I’m not!” Shushou shouted at him.

Gankyuu started a bit. “Shushou—”

“I am a child. I don’t know anything about the in and outs of imperial government and administration. When I came to the Yellow Sea, I couldn’t take a single step without relying on the help of others. A person like me could hardly safeguard the lives of others! The best I could do on my own was study, go to school, and become minor government official. That should be obvious on its face. If a person like me really did have what it takes, the kirin should at least have met me halfway rather than coming to a place like this.”

“Then why go on the Shouzan?”

“Because it was my duty!” The long journey through the Yellow Sea had done nothing if not convince her of her own powerlessness. “I am a subject of Kyou. If I was the prime minister, I would make a law that everybody in the kingdom had to go on the Shouzan when the flag of the kirin was raised!”

Her father had no desire to go on the Shouzan. He wouldn’t do anything to compromise the good life he already enjoyed.

“The next emperor or empress is somewhere to be found among us. Nobody knows who. But while they all tremble in fear at the long journey ahead and the dangers of the Yellow Sea, people are dying like flies.”

Hearing of youma appearing everywhere, they only wrung their hands and lamented the fallen state of the world.

“If every subject went to Mt. Hou, the next ruler must be among them. But instead they treat every bad turn of events like it’s somebody else’s problem, somebody else’s business. They bar the windows and the doors and whine about how bad things are getting from inside their self-imposed jail cells. Such stupidity!

“Shushou—” Gankyuu reached out to her.

“When I ask why they’re not going on the Shouzan, they laugh and go on about how I don’t know anything about the grave responsibilities of ruling a kingdom and the dangers of the Yellow Sea. I’m only a child, you see, and a child of privilege to boot. They smile and tell me how naive I am about the ways of the world, while *they* are wise to everything.”

“I see.”

“As far as I’m concerned, when people are dying all around you and you turn the other way and pretend it won’t happen to you, *you’re* the one who’s being naive. *You’re* the one who knows nothing of death and suffering. Do you disagree?”

“Not at all.”

“The Yellow Sea is a scary place, they say. Don’t be unreasonable, they say. What is unreasonable? Even I only came here with a single resolve in mind!”

Shushou slumped to the ground. Gankyuu caught her in his arms. “You’ve got nothing to cry about. You’ve done well.”

Shushou got to her feet and wiped her face with her sleeve. “If had no desire to go on the Shouzan, I might as well be like the koushu and say that nobody needs an emperor. When youma show up all over the place, shrug it off. Learn how to live with them, how to protect yourself from them, how to keep from being attacked.”

“Definitely.”

“People live in the Yellow Sea, after all. So people should be able to live in Kyou. You could hunt youjuu everywhere, pick up work guarding people traveling through the kingdom. Everybody would be a goushi or a shushi.”

Gankyuu grinned. “Nothing wrong with that.”

“Gankyuu, right now, you’re really annoying.”

“Oh?”

“It’s written all over your face. You don’t want to upset the weepy little girl.”

“Well, the truth’s the truth.”

“Hmph,” Shushou pouted, averting her gaze.

Behind her Shinkun gently asked, “If you were empress, what would you do?”

Shushou glanced up at the wizard. “That’s a bridge I’ll cross when I come to it. But if I did become empress, that would mean there’s nobody better suited for the job in the kingdom than me. What else could I do but resolve myself to take on the task?”

“Naturally,” he said, a smile in his voice. “And you’d be able to indulge in every possible luxury, with an army of servants kneeling at your feet and tending to your every whim.”

“Don’t spout nonsense. I’m the cute and clever daughter of a wealthy family. I’ve lived a life of luxury up till now, treated every step along the way with kid gloves.”

“And yet you cannot tolerate the ruin around you. Why is that?”

She couldn’t hide the surprise on her face. “Simply because I do not suffer does not mean I should sleep well.”

“No?”

“When the whole kingdom is safe and prosperous, when every subject wears silk and fills their stomachs with good food every night, *that* is when I will return to the lap of luxury, dress however I wish and eat whatever I want without a guilty thought crossing my mind.”

“I see,” he said with a smile. “But we should get food in your stomachs right now.”

Chapter 42

[6-4] **S**hushou put down the bowl with a satisfied smile. “You know, that was the first real meal I’ve eaten in a long time.”

Gankyuu couldn’t help grinning at her reaction. The koushu called the main meal of the day *hyakka,* a mixture of edible grains roasted and finely ground. It didn’t take up much space and provided enough sustenance to live on alone. So it’d become the staple of the koushu diet. To call it bland was an understatement. Though now that he thought about it, that was the one thing Shushou had never objected to.

“You may be the only person who’s never complained about the food.”

“Really? Well, I wouldn’t exactly call it *delicious.*”

“Surely you’ve eaten much better at home.”

“I suppose,” Shushou said with a shrug. “Every meal was a banquet, the table piled high with dishes. But after hearing stories at school about students going for days without a real meal, it was hard to appreciate the flavor.”

She sighed.

“Even so, what I didn’t eat would just end up pig fodder, and it wasn’t like I could hand out the leftovers on the street. And if I said I didn’t have the appetite for it, that’s just me being a prima donna. There wasn’t anything else, so I ate what was put in front of me. But I really didn’t care for it. Not the flavor or the cooking. The heart and the soul.”

“I guess that’s what good food always comes down to in the end.”

“Yeah, it does. Unless you’ve experienced it yourself, you can’t imagine what it’s like knowing that there are starving people in the world while a feast is laid out before you every day, like it or not. Your stomach empty and all those delectables right in front of your eyes. You can’t swallow. It sticks in your throat. Have you ever been in that kind of situation?”

Gankyuu said with a thin smile, “Can’t say I ever have.”

“While going hungry is certainly a terrible thing, having food and not being able to eat it isn’t all that different. I’m not saying it’s anything like starving to death, but I’ve often thought that actually starving would be preferable.”

Gankyuu opened his mouth to respond. Shushou scowled. “I know what you’re going to say, so don’t. I’m liable to loose my temper. I’m a pampered princess who’s doesn’t really know what it’s like to go without. Right?”

Shushou turned her head away. “Thinking you want to empathize with those who can’t put food on their table is nothing but charity. A child of privilege who’s never suffered in her life shouldn’t presume to go around helping people. Feel sorry for someone and trying to do something about it is simply inflating your own ego and showing off your wealth. Admit that you come from money and always went to bed with a full belly and they’ll only laugh at you. You don’t qualify if you do.”

“Hmm,” said Gankyuu.

“Now and then, I’ve wanted to pare down the menu a bit, except it wouldn’t accomplish anything. Economizing would only leave more money in my father’s pockets, not make the poor any richer or less hungry.”

Shushou took a long breath. “No doubt about it, I’ve had an easy life. When it came to food and clothing, no expense was spared. I lived in a large and luxurious house, the windows barred to ensure maximum safety. Bodyguards everywhere. But outside the walls, people were dying every day. However pitiable, it wasn’t my place to say so. I had only one thing left to say at times like that—”

She paused and held up a finger.

"Why didn't you at least hire a bodyguard?" Accompanied by suppressed smiles, the answers were voiced from next to the haku and aside the fire.

Shushou looked back at them and sighed. "I did think of becoming a government official. In that small way, I could work on behalf of the people, maybe begin to assuage those vague feelings of guilt. But the headmaster was killed by a youma and the academy closed. I was awfully naive. Studying hard and joining the civil service in order to improve the government only made sense if somebody in charge was running things in the first place."

Gankyuu said, "So that's why you decided you'd become empress."

Shushou shook her head. "No. But I wanted *somebody* to. There's no way a twelve-year-old could. I'm the first one who'd laugh at the idea. When the right person with all the right qualifications becomes emperor, the youma will go away. The famines will abate. That's why I was always asking people why they weren't going on the Shouzan. But I got no takers, except to be told that children are such simpleminded creatures."

She cocked her head to the side. "I figure if you've got the time to sit around complaining about how hard life is and envying the lives of others, then you might has well gather up your fellow whiners and go on the Shouzan. Otherwise it was so much spitting in the wind. Though when I thought about, the same applied to me too."

The expression on Gankyuu's face was one of sincere regard.

"I was angry that nobody was trying to become emperor. At the same time, I told myself there was no way *I* could and so there was no reason for me to go to Mt. Hou. I was pretty much putting myself in the same box as them. My actions had to speak as louder than my words. I would go to the Yellow Sea. When I returned I could tell everybody to put up or shut up with a clear conscience. Resent me or envy me, but I'd give back as much as I was given. And once I did, there was no need to make myself become some stuffy government official. I could do as I pleased."

"As you pleased?" came the soft voice next to the fire.

"I always wanted to be a kijuu stable master." Shushou smiled. "I like kijuu. Nothing wrong with being a shushi either. And don't tell me I can't understand what it means to be a koushu. I've had enough of *that.* I'll become a shushi, leave Kyou, spend all the time I want with kijuu. And if I happen to cross paths with an old friend and get an earful about how terrible things are in Kyou with an empty throne, I can tell them to shut up about it until *they've* gone on the Shouzan."

Now from beside the fire came the sound of smothered laughter.

"I really couldn't tell you myself that life is better with an emperor. That's what the adults all say, but there hasn't been an emperor since I was born."

"You don't say."

“There hasn’t been an emperor all that time. Yet my father went to work every day. I went to school. The government went about its business. And businesses went about theirs. Everybody got by the best they could. So I have to believe that even without an emperor, people will keep on getting by the best they can.”

She tilted her head the other way, as if posing the question to herself. The fire itself seemed to gently question that conclusion.

“I wouldn’t be so sure.”

“Are things really that much worse off without a ruler?”

“The problem isn’t so much that they’re worse, it’s that they keep getting worse and never improving.”

“That is a troubling thought,” Shushou said, folding her arms. “Leaving Kyou and taking off on my own is one thing. But it’d be hard living with myself knowing that life back in Kyou was going from bad to worse.”

Gankyuu settled against the haku and watched Shushou making plans and debating those plans with herself. With the pain mostly quenched by the medicine, a soft drowsiness was creeping in. The downy warmth of the haku pressed against his back. It seemed to his sleepy senses that Shushou was leaning towards a life as a shushi. She’d make a good one. But that probably wasn’t going to happen.

Shushou had journeyed to the south, to a waterless sea called the Yellow Sea.

Its back like the slopes of Mt. Tai
Wings sweeping like a cloud across the sky
Raising a whirlwind with every stroke
It takes flight, slicing through the lingering smoke
Tracing a broad arc in the air
Bearing the blue heavens upon its shoulders
It turns toward the south and the southern seas

That bird was the phoenix and these were the wings of dreams. The spreading of those wings came to mean setting off with great plans in mind. Riding on the wings of the phoenix came to mean a Shouzan that included the future emperor or empress.

Kyou could certainly do a lot worse.

Gankyuu shook his head and smiled.

I suspect a greater calling than shushi is waiting in store for her.

Chapter 43

[6-5] **T**he man and the girl and the haku spent the night huddled together. They awoke at the break of dawn and prepared to depart. The wizard didn't appear to have slept.

Before they left, the wizard had Shushou reapply the dressing to Gankyuu's wound. Undoing the wrappings and the bandages, she and Gankyuu were equally amazed at what they found. The wound had already begun to heal and form new flesh.

Shushou peered at the bamboo flask and then at the wizard. "This is amazing stuff."

The wizard smiled and gave Gankyuu the same medical treatment he had the night before.

"Um, didn't you say that Tensen don't interact with humans?"

"I did."

"Looks like you're doing a fair amount of interacting here."

He chuckled. "So I am. Well, nothing wrong with that. I'm curious that way, spending my days wandering about the Yellow Sea. Gyokkei has given up trying to reform me."

"Gyokkei," Shushou repeated to herself. So perhaps sticking to the matter at hand and avoiding unnecessary tangents wasn't such a hard and fast rule after all.

He smiled and got to his feet. "It's only a little further to Mt. Hou, but now's not the time to start taking it easy."

"Thanks for everything."

"You've got one last rough patch to go, the hardest, rockiest desert on the road from Ken. Don't let your spirits flag."

Shushou put down the saddle and looked up at him. "So you're not going to see us the rest of the way?"

"Hey!" came Gankyuu's scolding voice. He was hauling along the saddle packs.

"I'm afraid not," the wizard said with a small smile, and turned on his heels.

"What about the youma?"

"Well—"

"*Well,* he says. Are they gathering about us even now? That's what you said last night. If you knew that much, then you'd know if they were still there."

He shook his head. "I may have fibbed a bit."

Shushou glared at him. "Why am I not surprised? You are a scoundrel at heart."

"If you think me a scoundrel, then keep this in mind: a prayer reaches no ears if it is anything less than sincere."

For a moment, Shushou looked right into his gentle eyes.

"It must be from the heart, Miss. Otherwise, Heaven will withhold its divine protection."

“You Wizards of Heaven are a mischievous lot.”

He laughed. “I guess I’m not human, after all.”

“And if you weren’t telling fibs? Would you at least escort us back to the Shouzan road?”

“I do not see the need.”

“What a cold-hearted cur. There’s a wounded man here, you know.”

“Yes, a wounded man is here. But I won’t be. So the youma won’t come.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I so rarely run into other people.”

Shushou frowned in confusion. “I haven’t the slightest idea how you Wizards of Heaven think.”

He smiled. “In other words, you have good fortune on your side.”

“And you’re saying that meeting you used it all up?”

“Not in the slightest. But it wouldn’t hurt for you to stay in the dark a little while longer. Be on your way. You have the divine protection of the Lord God Creator.”

Shushou twisted her head and glanced at Gankyuu. He only nodded with a knowing look.

“There are times when adults simply become incomprehensible.”

Shinkun grinned and walked down to the stream bed.

“Oh, that’s right. Hey!” Shushou got to her feet and ran a little ways after him. “Weren’t Wizards of Heaven once human?”

“Yes,” he said over his shoulder.

“Then you have a name? Shinkun is a nickname or title, isn’t it?”

He nodded. As if remembering something, he took hold of the shawl wrapped around his shoulders. “You’ll need this when crossing the desert.”

He undid the shawl and tossed it to her, revealing the armor underneath. The sunlight slanting through the treetops sparkled off the chain of jewels.

“What’s this?”

“You’re missing a sleeve. You’ll get sunburned otherwise.”

“Thank you. What was your name again?”

“What good will knowing it do you?”

“When people meet, their names become the foundation of the relationship.” Shushou said with a slight bow, “My name is Shushou. That is Gankyuu. The haku still doesn’t have a name. Gankyuu said I could give it one. If you don’t mind, yours will do nicely.”

He grinned. A breeze tousled his hair, black tinged with blue. He said, “The name is Kouya.”

Chapter 44

[6-6] **T**he sun climbed high into the cloudless heavens. Gankyuu eyed the sky with a puzzled expression. “There’s hardly been any rain.”

“Is that so strange?”

“It doesn’t rain that much in the Yellow Sea to begin with. But the lack of rain up to now is quite extraordinary. A good thing we were able to stock up on water here.”

“Hmm.”

Through the branches of the pine trees Shushou could see the crisp ridgelines of the mountain far in the distance. That, as ever, remained their goal. Except—

Shushou took the reins while Gankyuu set the saddle on the haku’s back. “Gankyuu, do you know the way back to the road?”

He answered with an air of exasperation. “If I knew that, I wouldn’t be concerned about water.”

“You don’t know where the road is?”

“The result of all the running away we did. The koushu village is over there, so I should be able to get a bearing on our position eventually. But I’m not a goushi. The road is not usually where I go.”

“I should have made Shinkun take us back to the road, even if that meant twisting his arm.” Shushou held the ends of the reins in her teeth and handed Gankyuu the shawl Shinkun had given her.

“You can be one mean little kid.”

“Not as bad as you, Gankyuu. Do you think we’ll meet up with Rikou and the goushi?”

“Dunno. We’ll figure out something.” Gankyuu carefully folded the shawl. They still had a few miles to go before it’d become necessary. “Seeing that we had the good fortune to run into one of the gods of the Gyokkei, running into the goushi should be a piece of cake.”

“That’s right. I am an extremely lucky person. That luck saved you too, wouldn’t you say, Gankyuu?” Shushou smiled as she fastened the travel packs to the saddle.

Gankyuu climbed into the saddle and reached down for her. “Considering what we’ve gone though up to this point, I’m getting you to Mt. Hou no matter what. We’ll think about what comes next after that.”

“If the empress business doesn’t work out, I am going to become a koushu. How about you take me on as an apprentice, Gankyuu?”

He said with a wry smile, “You do have parents, don’t you, Shushou?”

“Of course I do.”

“You don’t like them?” Gankyuu asked as they descended along the bank of the stream.

“It’s not that I don’t. But I really can’t respect them. Their way of coping with life is to put more bars on the windows and hire more bodyguards. When I ask them why they don’t go on the Shouzan, they laugh and say they’re just humble merchants.”

“Aren’t they very wealthy merchants?”

“The commodities trade alone is huge. My father has every other government official in Renshou on the take and exploits the chaos to expand his trading opportunities. He recruits refugees and makes them indentured servants. Using that dirt-cheap labor, he beats down the price of grain in distressed farming areas, corners the market, and jacks up the prices in places where people are on the verge of starvation. There’s nothing to admire about a man like that.”

“Oh.”

“Since I’ve been a member of the family all along, it’d make sense to stick around for the long haul. It’s not like I don’t feel a sense of obligation for being given a life so much better than most other people. But when I turn eighteen and receive my allotment, I’m leaving home. My brothers sold their allotments and joined the family business. Not me.”

Shushou twisted around and glanced up at Gankyuu. “If I became your apprentice, I wouldn’t have to wait until I was eighteen.”

“Becoming an apprentice may be out of your reach even now. Shouldn’t you be more concerned about what you’ll do as empress?”

“As empress—” Shushou muttered to herself, turning to look at Gankyuu again. “How about this? If I don’t, then you take me on as your apprentice. If I do, then you become my retainer.”

Gankyuu grinned. “Me?”

“Yeah, you. People are dying in Renshou, getting attacked by youma. Once you’ve seen Ken, it makes sense why. Renshou isn’t prepared to deal with youma in the slightest. If the whole kingdom were as well defended as Ken, and even half the koushu were available to teach people the best ways to deal with youma, the casualties would go down a whole lot.”

Gankyuu only shook his head. “That’s not something you need to worry about. Once the throne is filled, the youma will go away.”

“Yeah, what everybody says. It speaks volumes that nobody was prepared for the destruction. When there’s an emperor and life is good, people only care about making their way up in the world. They don’t seriously consider the downside until the throne is vacant.”

“Of course.”

“If I become empress, the goushi will be out of a job. If they all become shushi, they’ll produce a surplus and the market for kijuu will collapse. In that case, joining the civil service will pay a lot better, no?”

“Government work isn’t exactly suited to my temperament.”

“Then I’ll hire you as a goushi. The kingdom’s been going downhill for a while now. The place is overrun with harpies a lot nastier than mere youma. When you’re not working as my bodyguard, you can travel here to the Yellow Sea and hunt kijuu for me. Hunting kijuu will be more enjoyable once I make you a wizard. At least you’ll fare better the next time a youma takes a swipe at you with its talons.”

“Well, I’ll think about it.”

Is this the child or the adult? Gankyuu mused to himself. It was undoubtedly the child who, aroused by the ruin around her, impulsively decided to go on the Shouzan. But successfully executing such an audacious plan was an extraordinary achievement for any adult, let alone a child.

“Oh, that’s right,” Shushou piped up. “Those bastards who prowl about Ken hunting other people’s kijuu, they’re first on my agenda.”

Gankyuu laughed out loud.

At that moment, “Ahoy!” called out a third voice. They looked up to see a kijuu galloping down the slope of a nearby hill. The kijuu was a suugu.

“Wow! It’s Seisai. Rikou came to meet us.”

“He did a good job of finding us, considering how far we’ve come from where we fought it out with that harpy.”

“Indeed. Maybe he tracked our scent.”

Shushou laughed and raised her arm. The suugu covered the rest of the slope with a flying jump and landed a few yards away from the haku.

“You two seem to have made it through okay.”

Shushou puffed out her chest a bit. “Because I was there. You’re looking good too, Rikou. Did you meet up with the goushi?”

“Without you, though.”

“And a good thing, too.”

Rikou chuckled. He dismounted and patted the suugu on the neck. Seisai leapt high into the air, landed on the top of the hill, looked over the other side and then back at them.

“The goushi? They came all the way here?”

“Yep,” Rikou said with a nod.

“They sure didn’t have any trouble finding us. I was saying how maybe they followed our scent.”

“Your scent? Well, there is that. What with all the commotion, it wasn’t hard

tracking you down."

Shushou tilted her head to the side and peered back at Gankyuu. Gankyuu appeared no less confused than her. Rikou didn't say anything more. He reached up. The still perplexed Shushou took his hand and climbed out of the saddle.

Urging Gankyuu forward, Rikou asked. "How's that leg of yours?"

"It's fine, thanks again to Shushou's good luck. What's going on?"

Rikou said with a sly grin, "A big commotion." He gave the haku a grateful pat on the neck. "Nice to see you in one piece too." He glanced over his shoulder. "I do think myself more suited to a haku. It'd be fine with me if you want to take back the suugu."

"I wouldn't mind but I think the haku would."

Shushou bit back a laugh. "Oh, that's not it. The haku is special."

"Don't ask," Gankyuu said, as Rikou led them forward.

"Because he's got the best name in the whole world. A shushi like Gankyuu can never let him go."

"I told you—" Gankyuu started to say. At the top of the hill, Seisai waved his magnificently long tail.

"They're here."

Rikou narrowed his eyes. A cloud of dust rose up beyond the hill. A rokushoku came over the top of the hill, followed by a whole company of kijuu. With Seisai in the lead, they nimbly descended the steep slope.

Shushou gaped at the sight. So did Gankyuu. Crowded among the plainly attired goushi were women in brightly-colored kimonos. Stranger still, one of the thirty or so kijuu riders was a man she didn't recognize. He was astride a youma. Not a kijuu, clearly a youma. His golden hair flashed beneath the azure sky like a wave of polished copper.

Gankyuu and Shushou were momentarily at a loss for words.

"Gankyuu, that's—"

"He most likely is."

Shushou turned to Rikou. "Why in the world is the kirin coming here?"

"I can only think of one good reason."

"One good reason?"

Gankyuu took in the approaching company and grinned. "Yeah, they're here to meet us."

"Meet us? What for?"

"What do you think?"

"But who?"

Rikou chuckled. "I was born in Sou. And Gankyuu—"

"I was born in Ryuu. And I'm pretty sure the haku was born in the Yellow Sea."

"But—" Shushou sputtered.

Rikou clapped her on the shoulder. “Alas, only one person here was born in Kyou.”

“You can’t be serious.” Shushou clung to Gankyuu’s side. “What am I supposed to do?”

Gankyuu patted the dumbfounded girl on the back. “You and your luck reeled in a wizard and now a kirin. What is there left to say?”

A girl with the kind of good fortune that could reel in an entire kingdom. There was only one thing left to say: *But of course.*

“Go.”

Gankyuu gave her a gentle push. She took two steps and looked back in confusion. Leaning against the haku, Gankyuu pointed with his finger. Rikou smiled and motioned with his hand for her to keep going.

She nodded and walked on, meeting the company at the base of the hill.

The goushi were there, Kinhaku among them, along with an anxious Shoutan. The women she didn’t recognize must be wizardesses from Mt. Hou.

Shushou stood there paralyzed. They all dismounted and knelt on the ground. It’d make sense if they were bowing to the kirin. But why were the wizardesses and the goushi bowing to *her*?

Only the man with a bright, friendly face and the head of copper hair remained in the saddle. For a long minute, he took in the girl in front of him. His eyes narrowed. He smiled with relief and joy. He dismounted. Despite his large, sturdy frame, he moved with an effortless grace, alighting on the ground without a sound.

“Um—” said the bewildered Shushou.

He walked up to her and knelt down. “I have come to see you,” he said with another genuine smile, the words ringing with faint and haunting reverberations.

“Um, me?”

“Yes, you.”

The expression on his face struck her as that of a man who had just met with the most extraordinary stroke of good luck.

“Really?”

He nodded. “I could sense your Imperial spirit all the way from Mt. Hou.”

Shushou took a good hard look at him. She’d commandeered Keika’s kimono, run away from home on a moukyoku, left Renshou in the middle of winter, and crossed Kyou to the Yellow Sea. Looking back on it now, she realized she’d covered a staggering distance.

In that moment, an irrepressible impulse arose from the back of her brain. Shushou raised her right hand. The company watched in amazement and winced in unison as the little girl biffed the big man across the top of his head.

“Then why didn’t you show up when I was born, you darned silly fool!”

The kirin looked up at her in stunned disbelief. The girl’s young cheeks flushed

bright red. Her shoulders dropped and she let out a long breath. A smile rose to her lips.

The kirin smiled as well, from the bottom of his heart, and bowed his head low to the ground.

Postscript

A small black dot appeared high in the skies above the Yellow Sea.

It headed due south, gliding above the Sea of Clouds, crossed the Kongou Mountains, and emerged into the skies over the Red Sea at the southern tip of the Yellow Sea.

The black dot continued on its southward path across the bright blue waters. A day and a night later it came to the borders of Sou, the southernmost of the eight contiguous kingdoms. Maintaining the same trajectory, it finally disappeared over the horizon toward Ryuukou, the imperial capital.

Seikan Palace snaked along the peaks of the Mt. Ryuukou, the capital of Sou. This was the imperial residence of the renowned Emperor of Sou.

Rising more prominently above the Sea of Clouds than the mountain summit itself, the alabaster palaces jutting out over the water, the multistoried pagodas, the gardens, and the white stone bridges and corridors connecting them came together to form a single palace structure.

Abutting the inner palace at the very back was the Enshin, the compound that constituted the imperial living quarters. A large courtyard bordered a calm pool of water in which reflected the shimmering arc of the Milky Way.

A court lady quietly appeared on the portico surrounding the courtyard. She knelt and bowed to the woman standing there.

“Ah, Taiho, there you are.”

The Taiho turned and smiled softly. Her golden hair was streaked with silver. The court lady bowed lower.

“His Excellency has returned.”

“Oh?” the Taiho said in her crystal clear voice. She thanked the court lady and proceeded to Jinjuu Manor.

The living foundation of this long-lived dynasty, she was officially known as Sourin.

She had placed the present Emperor of Sou on the throne.

It was a fair distance from Jinjuu Manor to the main hall of the Rokuchou. Sourin declined an offer to have a boat summoned and instead crossed through Jinjuu Manor to the Rokuchou at the back of the inner palace. She bowed and entered the room.

Flanked by several assistants, the emperor was changing out of his ceremonial traveling robes.

"Welcome back, Your Highness."

He glanced over his shoulder. "Oh, Shoushou," he said with a broad smile.

He was a man in his fifties, a big man in fine physical condition. The uncommon Emperor of Sou who'd bestowed on Sourin the name of Shoushou. Or it might be said that doing so was part and parcel of being an uncommon man.

"How fares Kou Province?" she asked with a welcoming nod.

"The harbor is coming along splendidly," he answered with a jolly grin.

Having shed his formal attire, he strode deeper into the building. She followed him. The custom of the Rokuchou being assigned to the emperor as his main residence and Jinjuu manor being assigned to the kirin was not followed in Sou. The emperor and the kirin resided in Tenshou Manor in the middle of the expansive Koukyuu, otherwise known as "the palace at the back."

Ministers and bureaucrats were forbidden from the Koukyuu. Only a select number of attendants and the emperor's closest relatives lived there.

"Just what you'd expect of engineers from the Kingdom of En. You should see the anchorage they built, Shoushou."

"It must really be something."

"Yes," he said, with a strong hint of pride.

His name was Ro Senshin. Shoushou found him in Kou Province, where he was managing a large harbor inn. Her visit scared the living daylights out of him. But that too was a story from a very long time ago.

Word had already been sent, so when the two of them arrived at Tenshou manor, his bodyguards were waiting for them. (As he paid them out of his own funds, "bodyguard" was probably the best word.) They opened the doors with amiable bows.

Walking through Tenjin Manor to the Seiden, Senshin talked to Shoushou about the changes taking place in his beloved harbor town. Inside the Seiden, three people were seated around the big table. They stood as soon as Senshin came in and bowed.

Their official titles were Queen Sou, Prince Eisei, and Princess Bun (often shortened to "Bunki").

"Welcome home," the three intoned in proper and dignified voices.

Though her bow was a tad more respectful than the rest, Bunki was the first to raise her head and ask, "Your Highness, how was Kou Province?"

Senshin nodded and sat down. "Kou is doing splendidly. Now, let's see: one, two,

three, and Shoushou makes four. We're missing the fifth. Where is that prodigal son of ours?"

He looked at the queen. She sighed deeply. "Not only has he not come home, but we haven't the slightest idea what he's been up to these days."

Senshin echoed his wife's sigh. "He goes missing for a full six months at a time."

"And yet knowing that, you indulge his whims and let him fly about free as a bird."

"After giving my brother a kijuu like that, did you expect him to show up anytime soon?"

Assailed by his son on his left and his daughter on his right, Senshin slumped back in his chair and groaned.

"Stop it, you two," scolded Shoushou. "I told you before, your poor father can't defend himself when you gang up on him like that."

"Did you now?" Senshin wondered aloud, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling.

Bunki thrust out her hand. "'More importantly, father, where are our souvenirs?"

"Ah." Senshin reached into his pockets and drew out the packages. Shoushou watched, smiling, as they unwrapped the presents.

The emperor of the Kingdom of Sou built a dynasty that had lasted five hundred years. Only the emperor of the Kingdom of En approached the length of his reign and the acclaim he was accorded across the Twelve Kingdoms.

Though few knew that the emperor was not, in fact, one person.

To be sure, Shoushou, the kirin of Sou, had chosen a single man, Senshin, to be emperor. But a single man did not built the dynasty he led.

When Shoushou first sought out Senshin in her search for an emperor, he was the master of an inn in a run-down harbor town. The fame of the inn reached beyond the borders of the town thanks to the management of Senshin and his wife, Meiki, and their three children.

Senshin was a pillar of his community and the head of his family, a bighearted, clearheaded man not given to impulsive behavior. He consulted with his wife and children about everything and respected their opinions. Half of the inn's success he credited to them and endeavored to keep them involved every step along the way.

He brought that system with him when he ascended to the throne, the only substantial change being that now Shoushou joined in the consultations.

Meiki and his children did not hold any actual ministerial portfolios. Aside from being officially titled queen, prince, and princess, they did not participate in the affairs of the imperial court, and were widely thought to pass their time quietly in the Koukyuu.

In fact, the four of them exercised imperial authority equal to that of the emperor.

Well, to be precise, three-and-a-half of them, Shoushou thought, and smiled to herself.

Ever since he was working at the inn, the younger of the two sons would, when the fancy struck him, hire on with a crew and go sailing into the great beyond. His wandering ways continued after becoming a prince of the realm. But one good result was that Sou was always up to date on what was going on in the other eleven kingdoms.

At that moment, the balcony window opened. Seeing the face of the person there, Shoushou couldn't help laughing.

"Hey, good, you're all here," was Rikou's carefree greeting. His official name was Prince Takuro.

Meiki greeted the arrival of her son with another heavy sigh. "There are these things called doors, you know?"

"Yeah, but this is more convenient."

"You can at least welcome your father home. He just got back from Kou Province."

"Oh, so you've been on an excursion of your own, eh?"

"For the last two months. And you left two months before that. And still got back after him."

"Well, well, well. Welcome home, Father."

"Good heavens, it took you fourth months to think of home again? Where in the world have you been off to?"

"Mt. Hou, as it turns out."

"No fair!" Bunki wailed. "And you didn't take me! I haven't been to Mt. Hou once!"

"To be precise, I didn't set out with the intention of ending up at Mt. Hou."

His mother gave him a genuinely surprised look. "Mt. Hou? Without an invitation from the Mistress of Mt. Hou?"

"There is that. I announced myself at the front gate and she was apparently in a good mood. She allowed me to leave from the rear entrance on my way back."

"The rear entrance?" queried his mother.

Rikou pointed out the window. "Above the Sea of Clouds. I came here straight from Mt. Hou. A good long ways. A full two days. It's extra tough not having any land below you."

His sister chimed in, "You announced yourself at the front gate? That's below the Sea of Clouds! Which means you crossed the Yellow Sea to get to Mt. Hou!"

Rikou grinned. "That's right. I accompanied a caravan on the Shouzan and witnessed the accession." Now he bowed formally to his father. "She waited on Mt. Hou for an auspicious day to hold the Investiture. The phoenix should announce her enthronement shortly. I thought it important that Your Highness hear the news first, so I took my leave from Mt. Hou early."

Senshin looked up at his son. "What kind of person is she?"

Rikou said with a wink at his sister, "A young girl in whom I believe Bunki would

find a kindred spirit."

"An empress, then."

"Twelve years old."

It took the rest of them a startled minute to absorb that bit of information.

"*That* I didn't expect."

"The imperial accession is a difficult task in any case. How will a girl so young bring order to the imperial court?"

"It does seem a reach."

"Which is why I think you should write to her personally, Father, and send an envoy to congratulate her on the occasion of her enthronement."

"Ah, so you're intending me to have the girl's back."

"I think Shushou will have a much harder time ahead of her without your support."

"Shushou. So a twelve-year-old girl went on the Shouzan?"

"She did." Rikou sat down at the table. "A truly amazing young lady, if I do say so myself. Her temperament is perfectly suited to the role. If she can surmount the inevitable turmoil that every fledgling court goes through, I do believe she'll make a worthy empress."

Meiki set a cup of tea in front of her son. "Don't tell me you were the one who put the idea into her head?"

"Not in the slightest!" Rikou said with a boisterous laugh. "The likes of me couldn't instigate a girl like that to do anything but what she'd already set her mind on. We met in Kyou. She'd already begun the Shouzan. She's the daughter of the famous Banko Sou family of traders. Hearing that she'd run away from home to go on the Shouzan, I decided to accompany her."

"Left to your own devices, you're the last person who knows where he'll end up when he goes anywhere."

"Call it the workings of Providence. A twelve-year-old girl sets off with Mt. Hou in her sights. That girl runs into the profligate young son of the Ro clan. You'd think I'd at least have it in me to plan for the day when I could become the power behind the throne. But not at all. Rather, I was the one caught up in the extraordinary wave of serendipity that carried the empress-to-be along her journey."

"That is something else," marveled Bunki. "Crossing the Yellow Sea at the age of twelve. I'm eighteen and I can't image doing such a thing!"

Rikou smiled. "I think you're forgetting the other five hundred years."

Bunki stuck her tongue out at him. She turned her attention to her father on the other side of the table. "Father, appoint me ambassador to her coronation. Pretty please. I so want to go."

This time the sigh came from Prince Eisei (also known as Ritatsu). "So, Rikou, did

you get around to telling her who you really are?"

"Oh, that is definitely going to give her a start."

"Which won't happen if we don't send you."

"Exactly. That's why you have to dispatch me as the congratulatory envoy."

"No fair!" Bunki protested again.

Ritatsu shushed her. "What else can we do? Rikou will serve as ambassador *pro tem* to Kyou. We need to come up with an appropriate gift. Father, does that meet with your approval?"

It was Meiki who nodded. "But Ritatsu will be head of mission. Put Rikou in charge and who knows what misadventures will befall our diplomatic corps."

"Understood."

"Considering the importance of making a good first impression, sending Shoushou would be the best option. But not right after a coronation. Because Shoushou has such a frail physique."

"Mother, because Shoushou is a kirin, you mean. Say, how about we include Seisai among the gifts?"

"Ritatsu!" Rikou exclaimed.

Meiki nodded. "I concur. No good will come of leaving that creature in Rikou's care."

"And after I've gotten so attached to him," Rikou pouted.

His older brother spared him no sympathy. "If you don't like it, cast the blame at your own feet, vagabond. What if something happened in the Yellow Sea?"

"I took all the appropriate and necessary measures."

"As if your appropriate and necessary measures are ever appropriate or necessary. At any rate, what might the empress take a fancy to?"

"Kijuu. I must admit that she would not be dissatisfied with Seisai."

"That settles that, then."

"Yes, yes," Rikou said with forlorn look.

His father caught his eye. "So it seems my gift turned into something of a white elephant."

Rikou smile. "That's okay. Shushou will treat Seisai like a member of the family. Better, I suspect. But what a fine kijuu he was."

"You wouldn't be conniving already to get your hands on another one?"

"If you would only say the word—"

"The word is, let's first see what kind of effort you put into your next assignment."

"So that's what it's come to?" Rikou shook his head in bemused resignation and turned his gaze out the north windows. In a voice almost too soft to be heard, he said, "I made a few friends in the Yellow Sea."

And now that he knew his way around the place, he could well imagine hunting

one down on his own.

Five days later, the phoenix sang in the Kingdom of Sou. The news came from the Kingdom of Kyou: *The Empress of Kyou has ascended to the throne.*

From **The Chronicles of Kyou**

In the Eleventh Year of Fuhaku, Her Imperial Highness passed away in the Enshin. In that same year, a Kyouka appeared on Mt. Hou.

In the Twelfth Year, the Kyouka gave birth to Kyouki.

In the Eighteenth Year, the Kouki appeared over the Rishi.

In the spring of the Thirty-Eighth Year, Saishou entered the Yellow Sea from Ken. The Taiho sallied forth to meet her and sealed the Covenant.

The name of Saishou was entered upon the Registry of the Gods and she took her rightful place on the Imperial Throne.