

十二国記

(*Juuni Kokki*)

The Twelve Kingdoms

月の影・影の海

(*Tsuki no Kage, Kage no Umi*)

“Shadow of the Moon, a Sea of Shadows”

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Book I

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Introduction



suki no Kage, Kage no Umi introduces Youko Nakajima as the principal character in the first of two novels from Fuyumi Ono's epic series, *The Twelve Kingdoms*, that together form the foundation of the subsequent narratives. It is also where the [NHK anime series](#) begins.

However, the anime conflates several plot elements and invents others.

Sugimoto, for example, does *not* accompany Youko to the Twelve Kingdoms. Asano is completely made up (they attend an all-girl's school, after all), and he quickly disappears from the stage. Including these characters as convenient dramatic foils unfortunately adulterates an otherwise compelling account of wrenching personal growth. In the book, Youko faces her demons very much alone.

The starkness of her plight deepens the desperation of her actions and heightens the substance of her resolve. The moral evolution of her character, symbolized by her encounters with the harassing id of a monkey spirit, extends over the first volume of the book and builds towards a more profound and satisfactory resolve.

Ono's novels are wildly successful in Japan, which makes it all the more difficult to understand, given the popularity of anime and manga, why no U.S. publisher has picked up the series. One obstacle might be that the Swords & Sorcery genre, from King Arthur to *Lord of the Rings* and even *Star Wars*, has long reflected presumptions about the European history and culture, even when the story happened "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away."

Fuyumi Ono is also reaching back for a historical context, but to China. Her "Middle Earth" is suspended between modern Japan and ancient China. The fall of the Han Dynasty in the third century A.D. was followed by a period of political upheaval commonly known as the "Three Kingdoms." The era also produced China's most important literary work, [The Romance of the Three Kingdoms](#). The title of Ono's series undoubtedly echoes this historical reality.

The philosophical counterpart to Christianity (Tolkien was a devout Catholic) would, of course, be Confucianism. The second half of the novel, especially chapter 59, serves as a primer on the political implications of Confucian metaphysics, with the Royal En quoting almost verbatim from Chapter 13 of *The Analects of Confucius*: "How can he who cannot rule himself rule others?" (Compare Proverbs 16:31-33.)

This could be said to constitute the theme of the book as a whole.

Rest assured, though. Just as you need not be a medievalist to read J.R.R. Tolkien or C.S. Lewis, Ono's narrative stands well enough on its own. The historical precedent Ono is drawing upon does present certain challenges to the translator, however. As noted above, she has created in the Twelve Kingdoms a uniquely complex geopolitical landscape, detailing a hierarchy of governance that includes even the structure of the education system.

The problem is, she often creates her own compound words (think of descriptive terms such as "nation-state" and "city-state," and then extend that to a made-up term like "county-state"). The map that accompanies the novel clearly identifies kingdom, province, and city/town/village. But then Ono throws in three additional geopolitical divisions between city/town and province.

The first of these is a county or shire. The second resembles a Japanese prefecture and has a governor. If the European Union were a kingdom, then Great Britain would be a province, and Scotland a prefecture. The division above the prefecture is a "district." As [Yoshie Omura](#) defines it, "Nobody actually lives in a district; it is for administrative purposes only" (similar to a federal appeals court district).

Ultimately, the most convenient reference point is the [political divisions](#) of China: province, prefecture, county, township, and village/hamlet.

| Japanese | English Equivalent | Overseer | Example |
|--------------------------------|---|-----------------------|---------|
| <u>Federal Jurisdictions</u> | | | |
| 国 (koku) | Kingdom | King/Empress/Royal | Kou |
| 州 (shuu) | Province | Province Lord/Marquis | Jun |
| 郡 (gun) | District (for administrative purposes only) | | Fuyou |
| <u>State Jurisdictions</u> | | | |
| 郷 (gou) | Prefecture | Governor | Rokou |
| 県 (ken) | County/Shire (ward subdivisions) | | Shin |
| 党 (tou) | City (county and prefecture seats) | | |
| <u>Municipal Jurisdictions</u> | | | |
| 街 (machi) | City (walled) | | |
| 族 (zoku) | Township (for administrative purposes only) | | |
| 里 (ri) | Town (walled) | Elder | Hairou |
| 廬 (ru) | Hamlet (un-walled farming community) | | |

In one instance, though, Ono's vocabulary resists translation: the title. The translation I have used, "Shadow of the Moon, a Sea of Shadows," is a literal one, applying the more common meaning to *kage*. However, *kage* can be also be translated as "reflection," as in "reflected light" or "reflected image." This usage is found in a haiku from the *Kokinshu* (10th century, author unknown):

| | |
|--------------------------|--------|
| Ko no ma yori | 木の間より |
| Morikuru tsuki no | もりくる月の |
| Kage mireba | 影見れば |
| Kokorozukushi no | 心づくしの |
| Aki wa kinikeri | 秋はきにけり |

I look up and see
moonlight slipping through the trees
 And so I know
 that fond autumn
 has come at last

The phrase *tsuki no kage* here means “reflection of the moon,” or “moonlight.” In the novel, Ono specifically uses the phrase to describe the reflection of the full moon off the surface of the ocean. In other words, in English, the opposite of “shadow.”

In another instance, Youko is standing on a cliff looking down at the Sea of Emptiness (*Kyokai*), and sees the stars of the Milky Way shining up from the dark, translucent depths. In this case, *kage* refers to the shadow-like surface of a sea that “even in the light of dawn, looked like night” and the glowing starlight scattered through it “like grains of sand.”

This dual meaning shows up in the Kurosawa film *Kagemusha*, or “Shadow Warrior.” The title comes from *kage* (shadow/reflection) + *musha* (warrior). The movie concerns a lowly samurai who is discovered to be a doppelganger for his commanding general. When the general is killed in battle, the samurai is installed in his place to deceive their enemies. But he is a reflection of his dead lord, doomed to be nothing more than the man’s empty silhouette.

A more accurate translation of *Tsuki no Kage, Kage no Umi* might be, “The Moon’s Reflection on a Sea of Stars.” But that is a bit too pretty, and lacks that sense of “otherness” that the original Japanese creates. Even as a somewhat strained transliteration, *Shadow of the Moon, a Sea of Shadows* works well enough that I am loath to give it up.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Translation, as opposed to reading, really does focus the mind on what the author actually *means*, as opposed to simply propelling you along the narrative track. So the real credit goes to Fuyumi Ono for writing some of the most fascinating and creative novels in the high fantasy genre—in any language—and that only gets more interesting and morally complex as you go along.

Turning what began as an exercise in studying Japanese into readable prose was not a solo effort. I leaned heavily on Yoshie Omura's collection of [Juuni Kokki](#) resources. Yuko generously answered my questions about Japanese syntax and semantics. I'm indebted to Wiebe for pointing out typos and inconsistencies in the translation along the way, and to immi for slogging through the hard and too often thankless work of copyediting the entire novel.

I write initial drafts using [JWPce](#). My primary references are [Eijirou](#) and Yahoo's [Daijisen Japanese Dictionary](#), running under separate tabs in [Firefox](#). The OS is XP Pro SP2 with the East Asian languages module loaded. I dump the text into [WordPerfect 12](#) and then run macros to turn it into HTML, and do the final edit in Homesite 1.0.

Additional Notes by immi

ABOUT THE TITLE

The Japanese title of this fantasy series is 十二国記 or “Juuni Kokuki.” This literally translates to “Chronicles of the Twelve Kingdoms” or “Records of the Twelve Kingdoms.” However, since many people refer to it as “Juuni Kokki” or “The Twelve Kingdoms,” this is what will be used.

FOREIGN WORDS

An attempt was made to include the *kanji* (Japanese characters) of all Juuni Kokki terms/names during their first appearance within the novel. However, Youko often doesn't know the kanji either, until and unless it is defined for her. For example, she doesn't learn the kanji for “kochou” until chapter 18. In chapter 5, “Hyouki,” “Kaiko,” “Hankyo” and “Juusaku” are all written using *katakana* (a Japanese syllabary used for foreign words). Therefore, if the kanji is introduced, it will be included the first time it appears, or whenever someone refers to its characters.

While in-line translations are not provided for common Japanese terms that are already considered part of the English lexicon (“kimono,” for example), their definitions and kanji can be found in the glossary located at the very end of this document.

Also note long vowels. Whenever there is a long vowel, it is usually clear. However, there are cases where the long vowel is not in common use. For example, “Osaka” is actually supposed to be “Oosaka.” Or “Tokyo” is supposed to be “Toukyou.” In cases like these, the extra vowel is truncated in the *romaji* (romanization of Japanese words) version. However, the glossary will include the proper orthography in *kana* (Japanese syllabary).

The glossary is meant to make things more complete and easily accessible. It contains all the foreign words found throughout the novel (excluding words within translation notes and without kanji). Definitions are provided, if applicable.

Part I

Chapter 1



pitch black world. The girl cowered in the darkness. From somewhere came the high, clear echo of a drop of water striking the surface of a calm pool. A cave, she imagined at first, except that she knew she was not in a cave. The darkness was too wide, too far, too deep.

A crimson light blossomed in the distance. The flames flickered and twisted, shifted in shape and form. The conflagration climbed higher, casting long shadows into the heavy gloom—the shadows of a countless horde of beasts, beasts that leapt and pranced as they ran from the fire. Apes, rats, birds, every kind and species of creature, and none the same as those you should find in a children’s book, their torsos too large, their coats colored red and black and blue.

They whirled like dervishes, reared and raked the air with pawing forelegs. It made the girl think of Carnival and people whipping themselves into an ecstatic fervor. But even as they danced and spun, their attention remained focused on *her*, the sacrifice they would bear joyously to the altar.

Four hundred yards away from her and their mad and murderous intent beat against her like a hard wind. The monster at the head of the mob opened its wide maw in a jubilant howl.

She heard nothing.

Only the sound of a drop of water breaking the quiet surface of a pond.

She could not tear her gaze away from the rushing shadows. *When they reach me*, she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, *they will slaughter me*. Tear her limb from limb, gnaw on her bones. But she could not move. There was no shelter to seek, no way to defend herself. The blood rushed in her veins, roared like the ocean in her ears.

In the time she watched, the stampede had pressed another hundred yards closer.

Youko awoke with a start. She blinked the stinging sweat out of her eyes, took a deep breath.

“A dream. . .” she said aloud.

Hearing her own voice confirmed that she was indeed awake. She could not relax until she knew for sure. “It was a dream,” she said again. A dream. A dream that had plagued her for weeks.

Youko turned her gaze around the room. The heavy curtains shut out the light. The clock on the bedside stand told her it was almost time to get up. She should, except her body felt like a slab of lead, her arms and legs felt as if they were mired in tar.



The dreams started a month ago. In the beginning, she had seen nothing but the empty darkness, heard nothing but falling water. She stood in the pitch black with the awful panic growing inside her, desperate to run away, run anywhere, but frozen in place.

Five nights ago, she had awakened, screaming inside, haunted by the red glow and the shifting shadows and the black stain flowing inexorably closer. For the last three nights, she had understood the nature of the fearsome things running from the inferno.

Two days. It had taken two days for the strange beasts to separate themselves from the shadows. She picked up her old rag doll and hugged it to her chest.

They were so close.

In a month they had crossed the distance from the horizon. Tomorrow, or the day after, they would be at her throat.

What would she do then?

Youko shook her head.

It's only a dream.

If the dream returned again and again for another month or more, it was still only a dream. But saying so did not calm the fear in her heart. Her pulse raced, her heartbeat pounded in her ears, her breath burned at her throat. She clung to the rag doll as if to life itself.

She roused her body from the bed. She put on her high school *seifuku* uniform, and went downstairs. No matter how bad things got, she managed the customary things. She washed her face and walked into the kitchen.

"Morning," she said.

Her mother was at the sink, making breakfast. "You're up already?" She glanced back over her shoulder as she spoke. A look of concern crossed her face. "You're getting red again," she said.

For a moment, Youko had no idea what she was talking about. Then she hurriedly pulled her hair back from her forehead. She usually braided her hair before she came down to the kitchen. She had combed it out the night before and had left it undone.

"Why not dye it, just to see how it turns out?"

Youko shook her head. Her hair brushed against her cheeks. From the start, her hair had been unusually auburn for a Japanese. Exposure to the sun and water only washed out more of the color. Her hair now reached the middle of her back. The ends were so light that they looked pink.

"Maybe if you trimmed it a bit?" her mother pressed.

Youko didn't answer. She bowed her head, quickly twisting her hair into three braids. Doing so darkened the tint somewhat.

"I wonder what side of the family you got it from," her mother mused with a grim little sigh. "You know, your homeroom teacher asked me the same question. He even wondered if you were adopted. Imagine that! He thought it'd be a good idea if you dyed it, too."

Youko said, "Dyeing your hair is against the rules."

Her mother busied herself with the coffee. "Then get it cut. At least it won't stand out so much." She said in her matter-of-fact voice, "A girl's reputation is what matters most. She shouldn't draw attention to herself, or give anybody reason to question her character. It's not the kind of thing you want happening to you, that's all I'm saying."



Youko studied the kitchen table.

“You know how people look at your hair and raise an eyebrow. Stop at the salon on your way home from school today and get it cut. I’ll give you the money.”

Youko groaned to herself.

“Did you hear what I just said?”

“Yeah.”

Youko stared out at the charcoal-gray day brightening outside the window. It was the middle of February. The winter sky was cold and wide and cruel.

Chapter 2

1-2 Youko attended an ordinary high school. Other than it being a private girl’s school, nothing exceptional could be said about it.

The school was her father’s decision. She had done well in junior high and had aimed her sights higher. Her junior high guidance counselor had recommended a better school. But her father did not budge an inch. The school was close to home, had neither a disreputable nor controversial reputation. It prided itself as strict and traditional, and that was enough.

At first, even her mother was disappointed with the rank of the school. After all, she had followed the results from Youko’s practice exams. But he soon had her agreeing with him. Once her mother and father agreed on anything, there was no room left for argument on her part.

She could have qualified for a better school a bit farther away. Among other things, it had much nicer uniforms. But it didn’t feel right to make a big fuss based on the style of a uniform, so she kept her mouth shut and did as she was told.

As a result, now well into her junior year, she possessed little of what might be called “school spirit.”

“G’ morning!”

A bright trio of voices greeted Youko as she entered her homeroom. The three girls waved to her from across the room.

One of the girls hurried over to her. “Hey, Youko, you got the math assignment done, right? Let me see it, could you?”

Youko made her way to her desk by the window. She retrieved the assignment from her satchel. Several more girls quickly gathered around and set about copying down her answers.

“You’re such a good student, Youko. No wonder you’re class president.”

Youko shook her head self-consciously.

“No, really! I hate homework! It’s all in one ear and out the other.”

“Yeah, me too. The second I start thinking about it, I don’t understand a thing. It’s like watching paint dry. Puts me to sleep. I wish I was smart like you.”

“I bet you didn’t even have to crack the book.”

“No, it’s not like that at all.”

“You really like to study, huh?”

“Don’t be silly.” Youko made a show of being outraged at the remark. “It’s my mom, she’s always on my case.”

It wasn’t true. Her mother wasn’t strict at all about schoolwork. But it was best to go with the flow. “She checks my homework every night,” Youko lied. “I can’t stand it.”

The truth was the opposite. If anything, Youko’s bookishness annoyed her mother. It wasn’t that she didn’t care whether her daughter got good grades or not, it simply wasn’t a priority. “If you’ve got time to study all day, then you’ve got time to do your chores, too.” That was her favorite saying these days.

And it wasn’t that Youko cared for studying either. The simple truth of the matter was, the disapproval of her teachers terrified her.

“That bites, checking your homework every night. . .”

“I know, I know. My parents are the same way. They expect to see me studying every waking minute. No normal person can stand studying that much!”

“Totally.”

Youko nodded, if only from relief that she was no longer the topic of conversation.

Behind her someone said in a stage whisper, “Hey, it’s Sugimoto.”

The gaze of everyone in the room lit upon the girl who had just come in, and in the same instant fell away. A wave of cool aloofness washed into the void. Over the past six months, shunning Sugimoto had become the sport of those in that class who mattered. Sugimoto stared back for a moment, a deer caught in the headlights, then shuffled over to where Youko was standing. She sat down at the desk to her left.

“Good morning, Youko,” she said.

She spoke politely. Youko started to answer, only as a reflex, then choked off her reply. Once, not long ago, she had inadvertently exchanged pleasantries with Sugimoto. Afterwards, her classmates had piled scorn upon her.

So she said nothing, acted as if Sugimoto weren’t there at all. The other girls began to titter. Sugimoto bowed her head but did not look away. Youko felt her eyes on her. To hide her discomfort, she made a show of engaging in the patter of conversation.

She might feel sorry for Sugimoto, but go against the rest and the next time she’d be “it.”

“Um. . . Youko?”

Youko pretended not to hear. She knew what she was doing was heartless but she could not comprehend any other recourse.

Sugimoto persisted. “Youko,” she said.

The conversation stopped. As one, the circle gathered around Youko’s desk turned its attention on the girl. Youko could not fail to follow suit and found herself meeting Sugimoto’s upturned gaze.

“Did. . . did you finish the math assignment?”

The timidity in the girl’s voice launched the circle into another fit of giggles.

Youko struggled for an appropriate response. “I. . . sort of, I guess.”

“Could you let me see it, please?”

The math teacher always assigned a student to explain the previous night’s homework assignment. It occurred to Youko that Sugimoto’s turn was coming up today. She glanced around the circle. No one said a thing. They answered her with the same hard looks they reserved for Sugimoto. Youko understood at once that they were waiting to see how she was going to rebuff Sugimoto’s plea.

Youko swallowed the hard lump in her throat. “I . . . I still need to check it over for mistakes.”

The roundabout refusal did not impress her companions. “Oh, Youko,” one of them piped up, “you’re such a pushover.”

A voice filled with disapproval and reproach. Youko cringed inside. The rest of the group chimed in.

“You’ve got to be more direct than that, Youko.”

“She’s right. A person in your position can’t leave any room for doubt.”

“Or else you’ll end up surrounded by idiots who can’t take no for an answer.”

Youko had no idea what to do. She lacked the courage to openly betray their expectations. At the same time, she lacked the disciplined indifference required to hurl at the girl the kind of words they wanted to hear. Finally, she responded with a nervous laugh.

“I’m sure. . . .”

“It’s true! You’re too nice all the time. That’s why nobodies like her are always glomming onto you.”

“But I’m class president.”

“That’s why you’ve got to stick to your guns. You’ve got *real* responsibilities, after all. You can’t get distracted by every pest that comes along.”

“I suppose.”

“That’s right.” A thin, wicked smile creased her lips. “Besides, if you give Sugimoto your notes she’ll get them all. . . *dirty*.”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t want that.”

The circle dissolved into another round of vicious mirth. Youko joined in the laughter. But not before she noticed out of the corners of her eyes the girl’s bowed head, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

It’s her fault too, she instructed herself. People like her don’t get picked on for no reason. There’s always a reason. *They bring it on themselves*.

Chapter 3

1-3 Within the infinite dusk there was no heaven, no earth. Only the high, hollow sound of each falling drop of water. In every direction she could see the thin, crimson glow, the writhing shadows, the strange beasts galloping towards her.

Less than two hundred yards separated them. Their sheer size collapsed the distance further. There was a monkey amongst the menagerie, its mouth agape in silent, raucous laughter, its fur glistening in the red light. . . it was so close that with each leap and bound she could see the flex and draw of sinew and muscle.

She stood rooted, dumb and immobile. As much as she tried to avert her gaze, she could only watch the cavorting menagerie. The smell of death was thick on the wind and it choked her.

I must wake up.

She had to rouse herself from the dream before they reached her. Even as she repeated the mantra to herself, she couldn’t think of any way to do so. If will alone was enough, she would have done it already.

While she stood there helplessly, the distance between them was halved again.

I must wake up.

A frantic desperation possessed her. The panic coursed through her body, crawled along her skin. She gulped for air. Her heart pounded, her blood thundered in her ears.

What happens now, if I can't escape.

In that same moment, she felt a presence above her head. A crushing bloodlust descended upon her. Yet for the first time in the dream, she found that she could move. She looked up at tawny wings, limbs of the same color. Scaly feet tipped with razor-sharp claws. She didn't have time to contemplate escape. An ocean roar filled her body.

She screamed.

"Youko!"

She fled. She did not think about how to escape. Her body simply fulfilled the desire. She bolted and ran. Only afterwards did she stop to take in the landscape around her.

And the startled look on her teacher's face, the wide eyes of her classmates.

She was standing several steps back from her desk. It was the middle of English class. She breathed a deep sigh of relief, then reddened with embarrassment.

A beat, and a gale of laughter swept the room.

She had fallen asleep. The dreams had turned her into an insomniac. She often found herself nodding off at school. But the nightmares had never visited her before in the daytime.

Her teacher strode towards her. Youko anxiously bit her lip. She usually had no problems getting along with her teachers, but for some reason, this one resisted. No matter how accommodating and subservient Youko tried to be, her English teacher remained stubbornly antagonistic towards her.

The teacher tapped on the desktop with the corner of the textbook. "I accept the fact that a student will try to steal a few winks in one of my classes now and then, but this is a first, Miss Nakajima. Will you bring a pillow to school next time? I'd hate to think that our uncomfortable desks should cause you so much distress."

Youko bowed her head and returned to her desk.

"Of course, one has to wonder what you think school is for? Silly me, believing that students should do their sleeping at home. Then again, if you find your classes so tiresome, there's no need for you to show up at all, is there?"

"I . . . I'm sorry."

"Or are you perhaps too *busy* at night to get any sleep at all? Is that it?"

The remark produced an eruption of laughter, some of it from her friends. Youko even heard a restrained giggle from Sugimoto.

The teacher casually picked at Youko's braids. "Your hair, it's naturally this color?"

"Yes."

"Really? A friend of mine in high school, she was a redhead too. More so than yours, even. You remind me of her." She smiled to herself. "During her senior year, she ended up in juvenile court and had to drop out. Whatever became of her? Ah, it was such a long time ago. . . ."

Stifled laughter rippled around the room.

"So, are we ready to starting paying attention, Miss Nakajima?"

“Yes, ma’am.”

“In any case, you’d better stand there for the rest of the class, to help you stay awake.” She sniffed to herself, quite amused at her half of the exchange, paced back to the front of the room.

Youko stood by her desk for the remainder of the hour. The muffled laughter never did completely die down.

Her performance in English class was duly reported. That afternoon, she was called down to the office for a grilling about her personal life.

The vice-principal was a middle-aged man with a perpetually furrowed brow. He said, “In fact, a number of teachers believe you might be engaging in some, ahem, *extracurricular* activities. Can you think of anything in that regard that might be relevant to your recent behavior?”

“No.” It was neither the time nor the place to start explaining about her dreams.

“So you’re staying up late, say, watching television?”

“No, I . . .” Youko grasped for a good excuse. “I . . . my midterm exam scores, they weren’t so good.”

The vice-principle bit down on the bait. “Ah, yes, indeed. True, your grades have slipped recently.”

“Yes.”

“You of course understand that burning the midnight oil will only prove counterproductive if you can’t pay attention in class.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, no, no, I’m not looking for apologies. Unfortunately, Miss Nakajima, people jump to the wrong conclusions about the most innocent things. They see the color of your hair, and, well, you know. . . .”

“I was thinking of getting it cut today.”

“Oh?” He nodded in agreement. “It is harsh, I know. But as disagreeable as it might seem at times, we’re only acting in your best interests.”

“Yes.”

He shook her hand. “Well, that’s all. You can leave.”

Youko replied with a perfunctory bow. “Excuse me,” she said.

Behind her, a man raised his voice.

Chapter 4

1-4 He said, “I have found you.”

His presence was accompanied by the faint scent of the ocean. The vice-principal stared in amazement. When Youko glanced over her shoulder the man confirmed, “It is you.”

She guessed he was in his mid-twenties. Everything else about him was breathtaking. He was wearing a long slicker like a cloak about his shoulders. His hair, an astonishingly golden sheen, curtained a marble-like face and reached to his knees.

She had never seen him before.

“And who are you?” the vice-principal demanded.

The stranger ignored him and instead, did something even more astonishing. He knelt before Youko as if before royalty. He said, "That which was sought has been found."

"Do you know this person?"

Youko shook her head. "I don't, I don't."

While they stood there in confusion, the man sprang to his feet. "We must go."

"Go?"

"Miss Nakajima, what is this about?"

"I don't know!"

Around them, the handful of remaining teachers and office personnel exchanged curious looks. Youko cast a pleading, helpless look at the vice-principal, who drew himself up to his full height. "Young man, you are trespassing on school grounds. I must ask you to leave this minute!"

The stranger's face was a mask of indifference. He said coolly, no enmity in his voice, "It is none of your concern." He surveyed the office with the same eyes. "Do not interfere, any of you."

The imperial register of his voice had the immediate effect of leaving them speechless. He turned his gaze on the equally amazed Youko. "I shall explain to you later. But we must leave now."

"What are...?"

A voice, close by, interrupted her question.

"*Taiho.*"

He lifted his head as if his name had been called. "What is it?" he asked into the thin air. Concern darkened his face.

From somewhere and nowhere, the voice echoed again. "The enemy is at the gates."

A fierce expression replaced his impassive countenance. Nodding in comprehension, he took Youko by the wrist. "Forgive me," he said, "but this place becomes dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"There is no time to explain. They shall arrive any second."

Youko shrank from him, filled with an inarticulate dread. "Who's they?" she cried.

She was about to ask again when the disembodied voice said, "They're here."

The window nearest Youko exploded.

She closed her eyes, heard a shrieking howl, the fragments of glass raining down around her.

"What was that!?"

Youko opened her eyes at the sound of the vice-principal's voice. Everyone in the office crowded to the windows. A cold winter wind rushed in from the broad river just beyond the school grounds. Carried on the breeze was the strong scent of slaughter and the sea.

Glass littered the floor around her feet. Despite being closest to the window, she was untouched.

"How...?"

Before she could make any sense of the situation, the stranger addressed her. "It is as I warned. Something wicked this way comes." He took hold of her arm. "Follow me."

A desperate panic overcame her. Youko struggled, but the stranger simply dragged her along. When she tripped and staggered, he slung his arm around her shoulders. The vice-principal stepped in front of them.

“Are you responsible for this?”

The timber of the stranger’s voice took on a stone cold menace. “You are irrelevant. Stand aside. . .”

“Not before you explain yourself, buddy. What are you doing with Miss Nakajima, here? This some kind of gang thing?” He shot an accusing look at Youko, “What have you gotten yourself involved in?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“And him?” he said, gesturing to the man.

Youko saw the far more terrifying conclusions drawing together in the vice-principal’s eyes, that they were in this together. “I don’t know him! I swear!”

She twisted away, jerked her arm free of his grasp. At the same time, from above and beyond them, the voice called again, this time with greater alarm.

“*Taiho!*”

The people in the office glanced at each other, as if to discern the source of the voice. The stranger scowled at Youko in obvious frustration. “Must you be so obstinate!”

Before Youko could react or reply, he had dropped to his knees. He grasped her legs in supplication, his face fixed upon hers. “Excellency, I pledge to you eternal fealty. Know this and have no doubt.” He spoke quickly, his eyes not wavering from hers. “You must allow me.”

“To do w-what?”

“Is not your life precious to you? Then allow me to do what I must.”

Too stunned to coherently consider what he was asking, overwhelmed by the intensity of the moment, Youko found herself nodding in assent.

“Allow me,” he said.

Youko watched dumbfounded as this man—whom she had never seen before in her life—dropped his head in worship, his forehead brushing her feet.

A chorus of voices arose in objection. “Who is this guy? Is he drunk? What’s he on about?”

Youko giggled, despite herself. “Stop it. . .” she started to say.

In that moment of giddiness, a dark cloud eclipsed the light.

In that same moment, a low rumble like an earthquake shook the room. The courtyard outside the windows fell into muddy shadows.

“Nakajima!” the vice-principal shrieked, his face apoplectic with rage. “What in the devil is going on?”

Chapter 5

1-5 A torrent of water crashed against the building, blew out the remaining windows, swept a wave strewn with icy shards throughout the room. Youko threw her arms up in front of her face. A flurry of tiny darts stung at her head and arms and body.

Her ears shut themselves to the violence of it all. She heard nothing.

The sensation of being caught in a whirling sandstorm faded away. She opened her eyes. Glass glittered on every surface. Those who had gathered at the windows now crouched in shock on the floor. The vice-principal was curled up in a ball at her feet.

Are you all right, she felt compelled to ask, until she saw that his body was studded with brilliant shards. He wasn't all right. The others were struggling to their feet, groaning. Youko had been standing right beside the vice-principal, yet there was not a nick or cut on her.

The vice-principal seized her ankle. "Why?" he groaned.

"I didn't do anything!"

The stranger peeled the vice-principal's bloody hand from her leg. He was as uninjured as she. He said, "We must go."

She shook her head. If she left with him now, they would all conclude that they had been in on it together, from the start. But the fear of staying there overcame her. She let him pull her along. *The enemy is at the gates*. That meant nothing to her. The horror of remaining there amongst the bloodied and wounded frightened her far more.

They lit from the office, and at once came face to face with another teacher. He shouted, "What's going on?" His eyes shifted suspiciously to the stranger.

Before Youko could respond, the stranger gestured towards the office. "There are injured people in there. They need medical attention." He set off again, Youko in tow. The teacher yelled something at them she didn't understand.

She said, "Where are we going?" She only wanted to run home as fast as she could. Instead of fleeing down the stairs, the stranger headed up. "This way goes to the roof," she gasped.

"Others will be using the stairs below."

"But. . . ."

"Where we go now, hell follows after. Better that we not involve anyone else."

Then why did you involve me? Youko wanted to scream at him. *What enemy? What are you talking about?* But she did not have the courage to raise her voice against him.

He flung open the door at the top of the stairs and half-dragged her out onto the roof. Behind them came the sound of metal ground against rusty metal. A shadow fell across the doorway. Youko forced her eyes up, taking in tawny wings, a gaping mouth beneath a hooked, venom-stained beak.

A catlike howl burst from the wide maw. Each of the bird's enormous wings was tipped with five talons.

I know this creature.

She stood, frozen as if bound hand and foot. With each horrid screech, the creature's blood lust poured down upon her.

In my dreams.

An inky dusk stained the overcast skies. Through the heavy pleats of the swirling clouds streamed the roiling red glow of the setting sun.

The great, eagle-like bird had a horn in the center of its forehead. It tossed its head, flapped its wings, buffeting them in a foul-smelling wind. As in her paralyzing nightmares, Youko could only stare. The bird lifted its body from its perch, floated upwards, beat its wings once again, tucked in its feathers and plummeted towards her. Its scaly extremities reached out for her, the razor-sharp claws unsheathing from its horny feet.

She had no time to prepare. Her eyes were wide open. Yet she saw nothing. Even when she felt a blow to her shoulders, it seemed impossible that the creature's claws could be tearing into her flesh.

"*Hyouki!*" The name echoed through the air. A bright red fountain gushed before her eyes.

My blood.

Except that somehow, she felt no pain. She shut her eyes. *See no evil*, she told herself. Incomprehensibly, it seemed that death should be more terrifying than this.

"Hold on!"

She was taken by the shoulders and roughly shaken. She came to herself, opened her eyes to see the stranger glaring at her. The concrete wall was hard at her back, her left shoulder dug into the cyclone fencing that enclosed the perimeter of the roof.

"This is not the time to swoon!"

Youko jumped up in alarm. The collision had tumbled her clear across the roof. An awful cry of torment arose. Sprawled before the doorway, the great bird flapped its wings, fanning about it swirling gusts of wind. Its claws dug deep grooves in the concrete as it flung its head back and forth. It could not free itself. A beast had its jaws locked about the bird's neck, a beast resembling a panther wrapped in crimson fur.

"What. . . what is that?"

"I warned you of the dangers that awaited us."

He pulled her away from the fence. Youko found herself staring at the beast and bird entwined in their death struggle, then back at the stranger.

He said, "*Kaiko.*"

The form of a woman rose out of the solid surface on which they stood, like a bather rising from a pool. Only the upper half of her body appeared, a body clothed in downy feathers, arms like graceful wings. She held a sword encased in a magnificent scabbard. The hilt of the sword was inlaid with gold and pearl, and was studded with jewels.

It struck Youko as little more than a frivolous ornament. The stranger took the sword from the woman and presented it to Youko.

"What. . .?"

"It is yours. You alone may use it."

"Me?" Her eyes flashed from the sword to the stranger's face. "Why me?"

He pressed the weapon into her hands, his face emotionless. "I have no taste for the sword. . ."

"But you said you would help me!"

". . . and no talent with it."

It was heavier than she would have thought. How in the world was she supposed to defend herself with *this*?

"What makes you think I do?" she shot back.

"Will you die like a lamb led to slaughter?"

"No!"

"Then use the sword."

Youko was lost in a chaos of thoughts. She didn't want to die, not here, not like this. But neither did she have any inclination to charge into battle waving this weapon above her head. She possessed neither the strength nor the skill to do anything with it. The voices in her head told her to wield the sword, to not wield the sword, to wield it, to. . .

She chose the third option. She threw it.

The stranger shouted in anger and amazement. “You fool!”

She had aimed at the bird head. The sword fell short of the mark, skimming the tip of one wing and falling at its feet.

“Damnation!” Snapping off a series of clicks with his tongue, the man called, “Hyouki!”

The panther disentangled itself from astride the bird’s claws. It stooped, fetched the sword in its mouth, and trotted back to Youko. It was clearly unhappy about having to abandon its prey.

The stranger took the sword. He said to the creature, “Wait here upon my command.”

“As you wish,” the creature straightaway replied.

“Patience,” the stranger told it shortly. He turned to the feathered woman. “Kaiko.”

The woman bowed.

At that moment, the great bird lifted itself free, showering them with gravel and concrete. It gyrated into the air. The panther-beast clambered skyward after it. The woman rose clear of the roof, revealing down-covered human legs and a long tail, and attacked as well.

The stranger said, “*Hankyo. Juusaku.*”

As had the woman, the heads of two fierce beasts appeared from the deck of the roof. One resembled a large dog, the other a baboon. “Juusaku, Hankyo. I leave her to your care.”

“By your command.” They bowed.

The stranger nodded, turned his back to her, strode towards the fence, and vanished.

“Wait!” Youko called after him.

Without asking her yea or nay, the baboon reached out and wrapped her in a tight embrace. The animal ignored her protests, lifted her up, vaulted over the fence and leapt into the air.

Chapter 6

1-6 The baboon sprang from rooftop to rooftop, from rooftop to telephone pole, hurdling from place to place with great bounding strides, almost as if carried aloft by the wind. This jarring, rampaging form of transport eventually brought them to the outskirts of the city and the ocean shore.

The baboon released Youko atop the breakwater facing the harbor. In the time it took her to take a single breath, it disappeared. Glancing up and down the seawall to see where it had gone, she saw the stranger winding his way through the thicket of concrete tetrapods. He carried the jeweled sword.

“Are you all right?” he called to her.

Youko nodded. She felt dizzy. This was the baboon’s doing, the result of the stark insanity swirling about her. Her knees gave out. She sat down heavily and began to sob.

The stranger appeared besides her. “This is no place to weep.”

What is going on? she wanted to ask him. She could see that he was in no mood to offer explanations. She turned her face away from him, clasped her knees with trembling hands.

“I’m scared.”

His reaction was cold and abrupt. “Save such emotions for a later time. They are after us as we speak. We shall hardly have time even to catch our breaths.”

“After us?”

The stranger nodded. “You did not kill it when you should have. There is nothing we can do about that now. Hyouki and the others will slow it down, but I fear not enough.”

“You mean that bird? What was that bird?”

“The *kochou*, you mean.”

“What is a *kochou*?”

The stranger replied with a scornful expression. “It is one of *them*.”

The emptiness of the explanation made Youko shrink inside. “And who are you? Why are you helping me?”

“My name is *Keiki*.”

He offered nothing more. Youko sighed to herself. She had clearly heard the others address him as *Taiho*, but she was in no mood to press the matter. She only wanted to run away, go home. Her backpack and jacket were at school. She didn’t want to go back there, not by herself. And she didn’t exactly want to go home in this state. She crouched on the breakwater lost in her thoughts.

“Are you ready?” Keiki asked.

“Ready for what?”

“Ready to leave.”

“Leave? Where to?”

“There.”

Again, nowhere, anywhere. Youko couldn’t care less. Keiki took her by the arm, again, for the umpteenth time. Why didn’t he explain himself? Why did he keep dragging her all over the place?

She said, “Hey, wait just a second.”

“You’ve had time enough. There is no more to spare.”

“Where is *there*? How long is it going to take?”

“If we leave at once, a day.”

“No way!”

“What do you mean by that?”

His tone of voice cowed her. She had been toying with the idea of going with him out of curiosity. But she didn’t know him from Adam. And a whole *day*. It was out of the question! What would her parents say when they came home to an empty house? They had never permitted her to travel anywhere that far by herself.

“I can’t. I just can’t.”

None of this made any sense. Why did he keep threatening her, keep making these impossible demands? She wanted to cry. She knew he would berate her if she did, so she hugged her knees, clamped her mouth shut, and desperately held back the tears.

A familiar voice echoed around them.

“*Taiho*.”

Keiki quickly scanned the sky. “The *kochou*?”

“Yes.”

A shiver ran down Youko’s spine. The monster bird was coming. Keiki said to her, “I need your help.” He pulled her to her feet, placed the sword in her hands. “If you love life at all, then use this.”

“I keep telling you, I don’t know how!”

“No one else can.”

“That doesn’t change anything!”

“I shall grant you a *hinman*.” He called out, “*Jouyuu*.”

At his command a man’s head rose out of the rocky surface, an ashen countenance with sunken, red-rimmed eyes. Higher, and it became clear that he had no body below the neck except for dangling, jellyfish-like appendages.

Youko gasped. “What is it?”

The thing slipped free of the ground, turned and flung itself at her. She tried to run. Keiki caught and held her. The creature clung to her neck, cold and soft, and then oozed down her back. She screamed, “Get it off me!” She flailed uselessly with her hands. “Stop it, stop it!”

Keiki held her still. “You are being unreasonable. Calm yourself.”

She wanted to retch. Tendrils like cold strands of pasta snaked around her body from her spine and beneath the flesh of her arms. She felt *it* pressing heavily along the back of her neck. She shrieked in terror. She twisted away from him, pulled herself free, tumbled to the ground, fell to her knees, tore in a panic at her neck and shoulders, to no avail.

“What is it? What did you do?”

“*Jouyuu* has taken you as a host.”

“Host?” Youko ran her hands over her body. The loathsome sensation was gone.

“*Jouyuu* knows the way of the sword. This knowledge will be at your disposal. The *kochou* will arrive soon. You must kill it, and not only it, if you are to escape.”

“Not only it?” So there were more coming after her, the same as in the red dawn of her dreams. “. . . can’t. That *Jouyuu* or *hinman* or whatever it is, where did it go?”

Keiki didn’t answer. He stared up at the sky. “They come.”

Chapter 7

1-7 In the moment she looked to see for herself, behind her, she heard that strange cry. The sword was thrust into her hand. It didn’t register at first. She turned towards the cry and saw the great wingspan of the bird as it circled and fell towards them.

She shouted in fear, realizing at once that there was no place to run. The bird was descending faster than she could flee. The sword was useless. She had no idea what to do with it. Confront this beast with it? It was an absurd thought. There was no way to protect herself.

The bird’s fat-clawed appendages filled her vision. She wanted to shut her eyes but couldn’t.

A shock of white light flashed in front of her, followed by a violent, hard sound like two stones crashing together. A heavy talon, gleaming like the blade of an axe, stopped right before her face. She had checked its motion with the sword, half-drawn from its scabbard, held out in front of her and braced with both hands.

She had no time to ask herself how she had done it.

Her hand, as if of its own accord, drew out the rest of the blade. In the same motion, she swung at the bird's feet. A warm spray of bright red blood showered down on her.

In dumb surprise, she could only think, *I am not doing this*. Her hands and feet reacted of their own accord, hacking at the limbs of the kochou as it wheeled above them in confusion.

More blood rained down, drenching her. The warm liquid ran down her face and neck, soaked under the collar of her shirt. She shuddered with revulsion. She—her legs, rather—retreated, dodging the eruptions.

The monster climbed into the sky, righted itself, and plunged towards her. She slashed at the wings. With every move, she felt the cold tendrils rippling through her.

It's that thing, the Jouyuu.

Its wings shredded, the bird shrieked and crashed into the ground. In a glance, Youko took in the scene. The Jouyuu was doing this, she knew, was jerking her arms and legs around like a marionette's.

The giant bird writhed in agony, pounded its wings against the ground and clawed towards her. Without a moment's hesitation, she attacked. Dodging its assaults, she hacked away at the body. She soon was covered in bloody gore. All that registered were the loathsome repercussions in her hands as each blow parted flesh and bone.

She groaned in disgust but could not stop herself. She ignored the spewing blood and drove the sword deep into the bird's wing, yanked it out, severing a good part of the wing. She turned on her heels, face to face with the animal's screeching, frothing head.

"Please, stop!"

The great bird flapped its wounded wing, but was unable to lift its body off the ground. Youko ducked around the beating wing and stabbed at the bird's torso. She shut her eyes to what she was doing, but felt the soft resistance in her arms as the blade sank through fat and tissue. She pulled it free, spun, and swung at the bird's neck.

The animal's spine stopped the sword's forward motion. She pulled the sword free, splattering herself with flesh and fluid, swung again and severed the head cleanly from the body.

Only after she had wiped the sword clean with the bird's still quivering feathers did the control of her own body fully return to her.

She wailed in anguish and threw the sword as far from her as she could.

Youko leaned over the edge of the breakwater and vomited. Sobbing, she slid down between the concrete arms of the tetrapod and splashed into the sea. It was the middle of February. The water was cold enough to cut her in two. But her only desire was to wash the bloody filth from her face.

By the time she had returned to her senses, she was shivering so badly she could do little more than crawl up the embankment to the breakwater. Back on solid ground, she burst into tears. She wept with fear and revulsion, wept until her voice was hoarse, until there were no tears left inside to come out.

"Are you all right?" Keiki asked.

"Am I what?"

There was no color in the man's expression. He said, "That was not the only one. More are coming."

“And?” Her body was numb. His warning stirred in her nothing. Looking up at his face, she now felt no fear of him at all.

“They are strong, they are relentless. If I am to protect you, you must come with me.”

“Forget it.”

“You are being foolish.”

“I want to go home.”

“Your home is not safe either.”

“I don’t care. I’m cold. I’m going home. Those monsters, they’re all yours. You can have them.” Youko glared at him. “And take this Jouyuu thing out of me!”

“You will still need him.”

“I don’t. I’m going home.”

“You stupid woman!” He exploded in a rage that made Youko’s eyes go wide with surprise. “Do you welcome death? I do not understand. If you do not want to die then you must come with me!”

“Shut up!” Youko screamed at him. “Shut the hell up!” Not once in her entire life had she ever said anything like that to another person. A strange sense of exhilaration stirred in her chest. “I’m doing what *I* want and I don’t want *any* part of this. I’m going home.”

“You are not listening to what I am saying.”

“I’m going home.” She swatted away the sword offered to her. “I don’t take orders from you.”

“You do not understand the danger!”

Youko answered with a thin smile. “Well, if it’s fine with me, then what’s it to you?”

He said in a low growl, “It is *everything* to me.”

He nodded as she passed. Before she could react, two white arms had reached around and had taken hold of her.

“What are you doing?”

She strained to glance back over her shoulder. It was the winged woman who had first borne the sword to her. She pinned Youko’s arms, forced the sword into her embrace.

“Let me go!”

Keiki said, “You are my lord.”

“My what?”

“You are my lord. Under any other circumstances, whatever command you gave, I would obey. You must forgive me. Once your safety has been secured, then any explanation you desire I will provide. If you wish to return home, that too, I will endeavor to accomplish.”

“When in the world did I become your lord?”

“There is no time for that,” he answered with a cold look. “I would gladly see one such as you abdicate, but that is not my decision to make. I cannot abandon you. The best I can do is keep more innocents from being drawn in. If force is what is required, then force I will employ. Keiko, take her.”

“Let me go!”

“Hankyo,” Keiki beckoned. The copper-haired beast emerged from the shadows. “We must get away from here. This place is thick with the scent of blood.”

Next appeared the enormous panther called Hyouki. Still pinning Youko's arms, the woman climbed astride the panther-beast and set Youko onto its back in front of her. Keiki in turn mounted Hankyo.

Youko pleaded with him. "Please, I'm not kidding. Take me home! Take this thing out of me!"

"He is of no bother to you, is he? Now that he has fully possessed you, you should not feel his presence again."

"I don't care if I can feel it or not! Get rid of it!"

Keiki addressed himself to the Jouyuu. "Do not reveal yourself. Be as if you were not there."

There was no reply.

Keiki nodded. Youko barely had time to grip the woman's arms to steady herself as the beast rose on its haunches and leapt upwards. "Stop!" she shouted.

The panther-beast did not heed her. It climbed effortlessly into the sky, doggy-paddling through the air as it slowly gathered speed. Were it not for the ground falling away beneath them, she could have believed they were not moving at all.

As if in a dream, the beast galloped farther and farther away from the earth, revealing one last glimpse of the city below, wrapped in the falling dusk.

Chapter 8

1-8 The heavens were suffused with a cold, starry light. Across the surface of the earth, a constellation of stars traced the outlines of the city.

The panther-beast soared over the bay as if swimming through the air. The speed of their departure stole her breath away, yet strangely, she did not feel the fierce and expected wind and so had little sense of their velocity. She knew how fast they must be going only from the rate at which the cityscape disappeared behind her.

No matter how much she pleaded, no one answered her.

And with no way to judge the rate of their progress, her fear in this regard subsided, and instead shifted to the uncertain nature of their destination.

The panther-beast turned towards the open sea. She could no longer see Keiki astride his flying creature. He had promised this was to be a long journey.

Along with her exhaustion, a profound sense of indifference overcame her. She gave up, ceased her protests. And now that she thought about it, as she shifted her limbs about, she was not uncomfortable. The woman's arms were warm around her waist.

Youko hesitated, then asked, "Are they still after us?" She twisted around to look at the woman.

She said, "They are legion." Yet her voice was gentle and somehow reassuring.

"Who are you?"

"We are servants of the Taiho. Now face yourself forward. He would not be pleased if I dropped you."

Youko reluctantly straightened. All she could see was the dark sky and the dark ocean, the faint light of the stars, the faint white light of the waves. A high, winter moon. Nothing else.

“Keep ahold of the sword. Under no circumstances should you let it out of your possession.”

The reminder struck within Youko a chord of fear. It could only mean that more gruesome battles faced them.

“The enemy?”

“They pursue us. But Hyouki is fast. Do not worry.”

“Then. . .”

“And see that you do not lose the sword or the scabbard.

“Or the scabbard?”

“Sword and scabbard are a pair and must be kept together. The jewels in the scabbard are there for your protection.”

Youko looked down at the sword in her arms. Two blue-green spheres the size of ping pong balls were attached to the ends of the ornamental cord wound around the scabbard.

“These?”

“Yes. Hold them and see for yourself. It should be cool enough to tell.”

Youko grasped the spheres. The sensation gradually seeped into her palms. “They’re warm.”

“You will find them of use whenever you are wounded or sick or fatigued. The sword and scabbard are valuable treasures. Do not lose them.”

Youko nodded. She was thinking of her next question when their speed suddenly slowed.

The white moon shone in a halo on the dark water. The intensity of the reflection weaving across the waves grew as they descended, almost as if the moonlight itself was exciting the whitecaps into a lively froth. Closer and she could see the surface of the ocean churning into a waterspout.

Youko realized that the panther-beast was about to dive directly into the ring of light at the center of the sparkling whirlpool.

“I can’t swim!”

“Do not worry,” the woman said, tightening her embrace around her waist.

“But. . .”

She had no time to raise any other objections.

They plunged into the whirlpool. Youko shut her eyes, prepared herself for the hard collision with the water. She felt instead. . . almost nothing. Not the spray of the surging waves, not the cold touch of the sea. Nothing but an immersion in the silver light, light that leaked through the corners of her eyes.

Something like a thin gauze brushed against her face. She opened her eyes. They were ensconced, it seemed, within a tunnel of light. There was no darkness, no wind, only an encompassing glow that enveloped them from head to toe, a halo of moonlight cutting beneath the black waves.

“What is this?” Youko wondered aloud.

There was a ring of light below the beast’s feet, as there was above its head. Whether the light streamed from head to feet or the other way around, she could not tell. In either case, they would cross it’s length shortly.

Almost as soon as they had leapt into the circle of light, she again felt the gossamer veil brush her face. With a bound, they shot above the water. The sounds of the ocean returned. Raising her eyes, she again took in the wide, dull expanse of the sea. They slipped from the halo of the moon. How far from the surface, she could not tell. All she could see were the tops of the waves bathed in the moonlight.

The surface churned into a radiant foam, as if driven by a fierce wind. The waves rose up around them in concentric rings, then broke into whitecaps. Astride the panther-beast, Youko could feel nothing of the hurricane, only the draft of a slight crosswind. The clouds roiled above. The beast pushed harder and climbed into the sky. They were soon too high to even see even the moonlight weaving across the storm-tossed seas.

“Hyouki!” the woman shouted.

The alarm in her voice made Youko look back at her. Following the woman’s gaze, she saw a multitude of black shadows leaping out of the moon’s bright halo.

The only light was from the moon and its reflection upon the sea. They raced into the covering darkness of the gathering clouds.

Pitch black.

There was no heaven and no earth. And then only the deep amber glow that remained of the moon, a faint light that danced and shifted like the flames of a raging fire. She saw the countless shadows and knew they were coming for her. The creatures raced from the blood-red moon, the apes and rats and birds, the red-haired beasts and black-haired beasts and blue-haired beasts.

Youko stared in amazement at this vision before her eyes. She had seen it before. She knew it. “Faster!” she screamed. “They’ll catch us!”

The woman shook her. “Calm yourself. That is what we are doing.”

“God, no!”

The woman pushed Youko’s body flat against the back of the panther-beast. “Hold on,” she said.

“What are you. . .?”

“I shall attempt to impede their progress. Tighten your grip, do not let go of the sword.”

Assured that Youko had understood her instructions, she took her arm from around Youko’s waist and vaulted rearward, kicking up and away from them. For a moment, Youko caught a glimpse of the golden stripes running down her back before she was swallowed up by the darkness. . .

Youko could see nothing but the engulfing gloom. They were buffeted by gust of wind. She plastered herself against the beast’s back.

“H-Hyouki-san?” she said.

“What is it?”

“Are we going to get away?”

“That is hard to tell,” he answered, inscrutably. He shouted, “Watch out! Above you!”

Youko looked up and caught a faint flash of red.

“A *gouyu*.” Hyouki turned without warning. Something slammed into its side and fell away.

“What was it?”

Hyouki continued on, dodging from side to side. Suddenly it slowed. “Draw your sword. It is an ambush. They have cut us off.”

“What do you mean, an ambush?”

Peering ahead into the darkness, she watched as another crimson light blossomed, watched as the hoard came leaping towards them out of the shadows.

“Oh God.”

The thought of raising the sword again filled her with loathing. At the same time, the cold tendrils touched the insides of her legs. With a force that made her joints crack, her knees clamped to the beast’s sides. The icy worm crawled up her spine. Her body peeled unwittingly from Hyouki’s back. Her hands released their grip, her arms prepared for battle. She drew the sword, tucked the scabbard into the belt of her skirt.

“Stop it!”

She extended the sword with her right hand; with her left, she grasped the beast’s mane.

“Please!”

They closed in on each other, tore into each other like storms colliding. Hyouki plunged into the midst of the hoard and Youko’s sword sliced into the onrushing flood. She could do nothing but scream and close her eyes. It wasn’t just the killing of living things. She couldn’t even bear the sight of a frog autopsy in biology class. Her existence should not demand so much slaughter.

The sword halted its motion. Hyouki called out, “Open your eyes! Jouyuu cannot defend you otherwise!”

“No!”

The beast reared, threw back its head, doubled back. Youko kept her eyes tightly shut. She was not going to cause any more death. If shutting her eyes stilled the sword, then that is what she would do.

Hyouki swerved abruptly to the left. They struck hard, a collision like hitting a wall. She heard the yelp of a wounded dog. She opened her eyes and saw only black. Before she could grasp what had happened, Hyouki keeled over.

Her legs lost their grip. She pitched into the air.

Before her startled eyes charged a beast like a wild boar. In her right arm, she felt the impact as steel severed muscle and bone, heard the roar of the eviscerated monster, her own screams.

And then nothing. No sight, no sound, no taste or touch or thought. Only her falling and falling through the endless dark.

Part II

Chapter 9



ouko awoke to the sound of crashing waves. She felt the spray of the ocean on her face. She opened her eyes, raised her head. She had fallen onto a sandy beach not far from the water's edge. A big wave broke against the shore. The water swept along the strand, bathing her feet.

Unexpectedly, the water was not cold. Youko lay there on the sand and let the waves wash against her. The rich smell of the ocean surrounded her, a smell something like the smell of blood. The sea was in her veins. That is why, when she closed her ears, she heard the distant roar of the ocean.

The next surge flooded to her knees. The sand churned up in the tide tickled her skin.
That deep scent of the sea.

She looked at her feet. The water lapping against her body was stained red. She glanced at the gray surf, up at the wide, gray sky. She looked down again. The water was indeed red.

She searched for its source. "Ah," she said.

Her legs. The crimson streams were washing from her skin. She bolted to her feet. Her hands and feet were stained red. Even her navy blue school *seifuku* uniform had turned a dark maroon.

Blood.

She moaned. The whole body was soaked with blood. Her hands were black and sticky with the gore, as were her face and hair. She cried out, splashed down in the midst of the breaking waves. The water rushed in muddy gray, receded crimson. She scooped up water in her hands. It bled between her fingers. As much as she scrubbed at her hands, she could not uncover the natural tone of her skin. The surf rose to her waist. A pool of color spread out around her, scarlet beneath the charcoal sky.

Youko again raised her hands to her face. In front of her eyes, her fingernails lengthened, grew to sharp claws half again as long her fingers themselves.

"What. . .?"

She turned her hands over. There were a multitude of small cracks or fissures running along the skin. A fragment of her skin peeled away, wafted away in the wind, tumbled into the water. Beneath the skin was a mat of short-haired red fur.

"No, I don't believe this."

She brushed her hand against her arm. More skin flaked away revealing red fur. Every time she moved, she shed flesh. A wave swirled against her. Her uniform shredded as if eaten away by acid. Water washed the fur and the ocean ran red.

The claws on her hands, the fur growing on her body, she was turning into one of the beasts.

“No, no, no,” she sobbed. Her uniform fell to pieces. Her arms wrenched about like the forelegs of a cat or dog. *The blood, the blood of those creatures, it’s made me into one of them.* It was not possible. She screamed, “God, NO!”

In her own ears she heard no recognizable sound, only the roar of the crashing waves and the inarticulate howl of a beast.

Youko opened her eyes to a pale blue sky.

Her whole body hurt. The ache in her arms was excruciating. She held up her hands and gasped in relief. Normal. She had normal human hands. No fur, no claws.

She sighed to herself. She wracked her brain, trying to remember what had happened. All in a flash, it came to her. She was about to clamber to her feet, but her muscles were so stiff she could barely move. She lay there taking one deep breath after another. Little by little, the pain subsided, some kind of motion returned to her limbs.

She sat up, spilling off herself a blanket of pine needles.

Pine. It certainly looked like pine. She glanced about her and saw a forest of pine trees. The tops of the trees were snapped off, revealing the white wood underneath. A bough must have fallen from those trees.

Her right hand still tightly gripped the hilt of the sword. So she hadn’t dropped it after all. She examined the rest of her body and found no serious injuries, nothing except for many minor scratches and bruises. Nothing out of the ordinary. Similarly searching her back, her hands ran across the scabbard tucked into the belt of her uniform.

A light haze drifted across the early morning sky. She heard the distant sound of waves. She wondered aloud, “What kind of dream was that?”

It came back to her, the fierce struggle with the beasts, their blood drenching her.

And the sound of the waves.

She groaned to herself.

She surveyed her surroundings. It was before daybreak. A pine forest crowded the shore. She was alive, she had suffered no life-threatening injuries. That was the sum of it.

It did not seem to her that any enemy was close by. Nothing foreboding lurked in the forest. And no allies either. When they had slipped into the halo of the moon, the moon had hung high in the night sky. It was almost dawn. For that long she had been a castaway. Keiki and the others must have strayed far from their intended course.

When you get lost, she reminded herself in a small voice, *you’re supposed to stay right where you are.*

Surely they were looking for her. Keiki had promised to protect her. If she started out on her own they’d never find her. She leaned against the stump of a tree and grasped the two jewels wound around the scabbard. Little by little, the aches and pains began to dissipate.

How strange. But it really did work. She peered closely at the jewels. They seemed like ordinary stones, though with the luster of polished, blue-green glass. Maybe it was jade.

Still tightly gripping the stones, she sat down and closed her eyes.

She had intended only to take a quick nap but awoke to a bright morning sky. “It’s getting late,” she noted.

But where was everybody? Keiki, Kaiko, Hyouki? Why hadn't they come to get her? Finally, she said, "Jouyuu-san?"

If he was still inside her, he wasn't telling. She could not feel his presence at all. In other words, he wasn't going to show up unless she started waving that sword around.

"Hey, you there?" she asked herself again. "Where's Keiki?"

No answer. Nothing. Big lot of help he had turned out to be. She raised her head nervously. What if Keiki came looking for her and missed her? She recalled the yelp of pain the instant before she fell. She had left Hyouki behind, surrounded by the monsters. Had he survived?

The unease pressed down on her head and shoulders. She jumped up, quelling the scream of panic rising from deep inside her.

Looking around, she spied to her right a break in the woods. Nothing between here and there struck her as dangerous. She could at least venture that far. Beyond the forest was a fallow field. The field was strewn with a thicket of shrubs plastered against the discolored earth. Beyond the field, a cliff leaned out over a black sea.

Youko approached the edge of the cliff. Closer, and it was like standing at the top of a tall building and looking over the edge. What she saw amazed her.

It was not the sheer height of the cliff. It was the water, black as the night sky, almost blue in its blackness. Even in the light of dawn, the sea looked like night. But then, as she followed the face of the cliff down into the water, she realized that the water itself was not black. It was perfectly clear. How deep, she could not begin to imagine. The sea must be so vast, so deep, that no light could penetrate its depths.

Then, from deep within the deep, she saw a glittering point of light. At first she could not make out what it was, but then there were many more of them, the small specks of light spread out against the wide black like grains of sand. Together, the light gathered into a faint, background glow.

Like stars.

Vertigo overcame her. She sat down. She knew what it was. She'd seen pictures of stars, and nebulae, and galaxies. Reaching out below her was the *universe*. The thought overwhelmed her: *I don't know this place*. This was not the world she knew, not the ocean she knew. She was on a different world altogether.

Oh God.

"It can't be true," she said aloud.

Where was she? Was it safe for her? Dangerous? Where would she go? What would she do?

"Jouyuu-san, please." She closed her eyes, raised her voice. "Jouyuu! Answer me!"

She heard only the roar of the ocean in her ears. Not a whisper from the being that possessed her.

"What am I supposed to do? Isn't somebody going to help me?"

One full night had already passed. Her mother must be worried sick about her. Her father would be furious.

"I want to go home."

Tears tumbled down her cheeks. She choked back a sob. "I want to go home," she said again. She couldn't hold it back. She hugged her knees, buried her face in her arms and wept.

Chapter 10

2-2 She sat there staring out at the sea until the sun had risen high in the sky. What kind of world was this? Where was she?

They had passed through the halo of the moon to get here. That alone was hard enough to believe. In any case, to capture a moonbeam like that, it seemed equally unlikely that you could do the same thing with the light of the setting sun.

Then there was Keiki and all those strange creatures. None of them were from any species on Earth. They must come from this world. That's the only thing that made sense to her.

What was he thinking, bringing her here? He said it was dangerous, he said he would protect her. Yet here she was. What were they up to? Why did those monsters attack her? It was like out of a nightmare, the same dream she'd been having for the past month.

From the beginning, from the moment she met him, none of it had made sense. She knew this much: she knew that she was lost. He had shown up out of nowhere, had dragged her off to this strange world without a second thought about the circumstances of her life. It wasn't because he hated her, she was sure. But if they had never met, she wouldn't be stuck here, she wouldn't have had to kill all those creatures.

So it wasn't that she missed him. There simply wasn't anybody else she could trust and he hadn't returned to retrieve her. Perhaps something had happened during the battle with the monsters that kept him from coming back for her. Whatever the reason, it only made things worse for her now.

Why must I keep dwelling on it?

Because it wasn't her fault. It was Keiki's fault. It was his fault the monsters came after her. *The enemy is at the gates*, the voice in the vice-principal's office had said. But that didn't mean they were *her* enemies. She had no reason to make them *her* enemies.

And that business about calling her his *lord*. She'd been thinking about that as well. Because she was his lord, his enemies had gone after *her*, not him. She had had to use the sword to defend herself, and she'd ended up here.

Nobody had made her lord of anything.

He'd made the whole thing up. Or he'd made a mistake, a really dumb mistake. He said he'd been searching for her. You'd think when somebody was searching for their king or whatnot, they wouldn't screw up this bad.

"So who are you protecting now?" She grumbled to herself. "This is your mistake, not mine."

The shadows lengthened. Youko got up. Sitting here complaining about Keiki wasn't solving anything. Glancing to her right and left, she couldn't find the gap in the trees she'd come through before. *Whatever*, she told herself, and marched off into the forest. She didn't have her coat, but it wasn't that cold here. It must be a warmer climate than where she lived.

The forest looked like it'd been hit by a typhoon, broken branches were strewn all about. The forest was not deep, and when she emerged, she found herself at the edge of a wide marsh.

It was not a marsh but a rice paddy. Directly in front of her, a causeway jutted above the water. She could see the tops of some kind of short green vegetation blown flat against the muddy lake. Beyond the rice paddies, a handful of houses formed a small village. And beyond that, the steep slopes of a mountain.

There were no telephone poles or power lines. No television antennas. The roofs of the houses were made of black tiles, the walls of yellow adobe. The village had once been ringed by a line of trees. Most of the trees were toppled over.

Youko pressed her hand to her chest. With a great sense of relief, she took in her surroundings. It wasn't the sight of the buildings, or the strange landscape she had more or less been prepared for. This could be any plot of rundown farmland scattered around the back country of Japan.

Some distance away, she spotted the forms of a number of people working in the rice paddies. She couldn't make out any details, but they didn't look like monsters.

"Oh, thank God!"

The exclamation rose unconsciously to her lips. She was still recovering from the confusion of seeing that black sea of stars. But, finally, here was something comfortingly familiar. If she ignored the complete lack of telephone poles, she could pretend it was an ordinary Japanese village.

She took a deep breath. She decided to call out to them and see what happened. She hated the thought of talking to people she had never seen before. She didn't even know if they spoke the same language. But if she wanted any help, she didn't have much choice. Partly to encourage herself and partly to calm her nerves, she said aloud, "I'll explain my situation and ask if anybody's seen Keiki around."

It was the best she could be expected to do.

Youko returned to the causeway she had seen earlier and made her way toward the people in the fields. As she drew closer to them, it became apparent they were not at all Japanese. There were brown-haired women, red-haired men. Many reminded her somewhat of Keiki. Their features and stature weren't Caucasian, either. Their oddness seemed mostly due to the color of their hair. Take that away and they'd be quite normal.

Their clothing wasn't that dissimilar from traditional Japanese garb. All the men had their hair grown out and tied back. They were breaking down the causeway with their shovels.

One of the men looked up. Seeing Youko, he pointed her out to his companions. He shouted something at her, but she couldn't make it out. The eight or so men and women there turned and looked at her. Youko acknowledged them with a slight bow. She couldn't think of what else to do.

A black-haired man in his thirties scrambled up the bank to the causeway. "Where you from?" he asked.

Youko registered the question with a deep sense of relief. They spoke the same language. She almost felt like laughing. She wasn't as bad off as she thought.

"I was over there, by the cliff," she said.

"The cliff? I mean, what's your hometown?"

Tokyo, she started to say, and changed her mind. She had decided simply to explain her circumstances, but it she doubted now that they would find anything about herself believable. As she stood there trying to think of what to say, the man pressed again, “You’re not from around here, are you? You come from across the ocean, huh?”

It was close enough to the truth. Youko nodded. The man’s eyes widened. “Yeah, figures. A real pisser, you know, your kind showing up out of the blue like this.”

The man grinned at her, as if comprehending something that she did not. He stared, his look approaching a leer, until his gaze fell on the sword she held down at her side. “Hey, what have you got there? Looks important.”

“Someone. . . gave it to me.”

“Who?”

“His name is Keiki.”

The man closed the distance between them. Youko took a step back.

“Looks heavy. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it for you.”

The look in his eyes did not assuage her. She didn’t like the way he spoke to her, either. She clasped the sword to her chest and shook her head. “It’s okay. Where am I? What is this place?”

“This is Hairou. Frankly, missy, a dangerous thing like that, don’t want you waving it around, ‘specially when you don’t even know where you are. Hand it over.”

Youko retreated again. “I was told not to.”

“C’mon, give it up.”

The force of his demand made her quail. She didn’t possess the courage to tell him no. Reluctantly, she held it out to him. He snatched it from her and examined it. “Yeah, fine work, this. The guy you got it from must have been loaded.”

The other men and woman gathered around them. Somebody asked, “One of those *kaikyaku*, is she?”

“Yeah. Look at what she was carrying. Must be worth a fortune.” He went to pull the sword from the scabbard. The hilt did not budge. “So it’s just an expensive toy!” He laughed and tucked the sword into his waistband. He reached out and grabbed Youko by the wrist.

“Ow! Let me go!”

“Can’t do that. All *kaikyaku* get sent to the governor. That’s orders.” He gave her a shove. “Get going. And don’t try anything.” He raised his voice to his companions as he pushed her along. “Hey, I could use some help, here.”

Youko’s arm hurt. She could not begin to guess this man’s true motives, nor where he was taking her. What she wanted most was to be free of him.

Immediately, as the thought entered her mind, a cold sensation crept into her hands and feet. She jerked her hand free of his grip. Her arm, quite on its own accord, reached for the sword at the man’s waist and came away with both it and the scabbard. She jumped back from him.

“The bitch! Watch out! She’s got the sword!”

“What? It’s just an ornament. Hey, little girl, calm down and come with us.”

Youko shook her head.

“You want to get dragged the whole way there? Huh? Quit clowning around and get your ass over here.”

“No way.”

More people were gathering around them. The man took a step towards her. Youko pulled the sword from the scabbard.

“What the hell!”

“Don’t come any closer. . . please.”

Everyone around her froze. Youko eyed them and backed way. As soon as she turned and started to run, she heard footsteps behind her.

“Don’t follow me!” she shouted, but as soon as she had glanced back to see them coming after her, she drew up, raised the sword, her body preparing itself for combat. Her blood roared in her ears.

“Stop it,” she told herself.

She lunged with the sword towards the nearest man charging towards her.

“Jouyuu, stop!”

It was pointless to argue with him. The tip of the sword traced a graceful arc in the air.

“I’m not killing any more people!”

She shut her eyes. At once, the movement in her arm stopped. At the same time, someone came upon her on horseback, yanked the sword from her hand, and knocked her roughly off her feet. Tears welled up in her eyes, more from relief than pain.

“Stupid girl.” They jabbed, and kicked, and punched her, but it was not too much to bear. Someone dragged her to her feet and pinned her arms behind her back. She did not care to resist. She pleaded with herself, with Jouyuu, *do nothing*.

“Let’s take her back to the village. Better take that strange sword to the governor as well.”

With her eyes still tightly shut, Youko could not tell who had spoken.

Chapter 11

2-3 Youko was marched down a narrow path that wound through the paddies. After a fifteen-minute walk, they arrived at a small town surrounded by a high fence. It was the hamlet she had spied earlier, little more than a rough handful of houses. Here, though, set into one wall of the squarish fence was a sturdy-looking gate.

The gate opened inwards, revealing another interior wall decorated with many pictures drawn in red colors. In front of the wall, for no discernable reason, someone had left behind a wooden chair. Youko was pushed along, past the wall and towards the center of the village. When she came around the red wall, an unbroken view of the main street opened up to her.

The scene again roused in her both feelings of familiarity and strangeness. The feelings of familiarity came from its overall resemblance to oriental architecture—the white, plastered walls, black tiled roofs, the distinctive latticework of the arbors. But despite this, she felt no affinity for the place, undoubtedly because of the utter lack of a human presence.



A number of smaller paths branched out to the right and left of the wide street facing from the gate. She didn't see a single person. The houses were no higher than a single story, but were all hidden from the street behind a white fence that reached as high as the eaves. Gaps appeared in the fence at regular intervals, revealing glimpses of houses set back behind small gardens.

The houses were uniform in size, and looked very much the same, despite small differences in their outward appearances. They could have been rolled off an assembly line.

Here and there a window was open, the wooden shutters propped open with bamboo poles. Yet from the street, Youko could sense no human presence. Not a single dog. Not a sound.

The main thoroughfare was no more than a hundred yards in length, ending at a plaza. Commanding the plaza was a building tiled with brilliant white stones. Yet the dazzling decoration seemed little more than a facade. The narrow streets intersecting with the plaza ran no more than thirty yards or so before meeting the surrounding wall of the town and bending out of sight.

On the streets, there was no sign of human activity.

Youko glanced about the plaza. Beyond the uniform black-tiled roofs, she could see only the high wall of the town. Turning around, she could begin to make something of its shape. It was something of a long, narrow and deep box. The confines of the town were suffocatingly narrow, no more than half as wide as her own school. It was like being inside of a big well, Youko thought. The town itself was like the rubble buried beneath the water at the bottom of the well.

They brought her to the center of the buildings facing the plaza. The building reminded her of Chinatown, in Yokohama. Yet the red-painted pillars and the sparkling walls struck her as no less superficial than the rest of the town.

They entered a long, narrow, hallway in the center of the building. It was dark and also devoid of people. After pausing to discuss some matters, the men prodded her forward again, and then shoved her into a small room and shut the door.

Her immediate impression of the room was that it was a jail cell.

The floor seemed to be covered with the same tiles as the roofs, though many of the tiles were cracked and broken. The earthen walls were cracked as well and stained with soot. A single window high up on the wall, blocked with bars. A single door, its peephole latticed with bars. Looking through the peephole, she could see men standing just outside the door.

The room's furniture consisted of a wooden chair, a small table, and a larger platform the size of a single mattress. A thick cloth was attached to the top of the platform. It was obviously intended to be a bed.

She wanted to ask where this place was, what kind of place this was, what was going to happen to her next, and a thousand other questions. But she didn't have the courage to ask the guards. And they clearly had no desire to talk to her, either. So without another word, she lay down on the bed. There was nothing else she could do.

As time passed, the human presence within the building became more marked. Outside her cell, people came and went. There was a changing of the guards. The blue leather body armor the two new guards were wearing reminded her of policemen or security guards. She caught her breath, wondering what was about to happen. But the guards only gave Youko a pair of fierce looks and said nothing.

It was almost more cruel this way. It was better when something—anything—was happening. Several times, she determined to speak to the guards, but could not find the courage to speak.

The hours dragged on. It was enough to make her want to scream. After the sun had set, and the cell had sunken into blackness, three women arrived.

The white-haired lady at the head of the three wore the kind of outfit Youko had seen in old historical dramas about China. It was a tremendous relief to finally meet someone, and a woman at that, not one of those grim-faced men.

The old lady said to the two who had accompanied her, “You can leave now.” They deposited the articles they were carrying on the bed, and, bowing deeply, exited the jail cell. After they had gone, the old lady pulled the table next to the bed. She placed the lamp on the table. The lamp resembled a candlestick of sorts. Next to it, she put a bucket of water.

“Well, then, you’d better wash up.”

Youko answered with a nod. Slowly, she washed her face and hands and feet. Her filthy, blackened, reddened hands soon regained their normal color.

By this point, Youko began to notice how hard it was to move her limbs. This was no doubt because of Jouyuu. Over and over, he had forced her body to do things it was hardly capable of, and now her muscles were torn and stiff.

As best she could, she washed her hands and feet. The water soaked into the fine lacerations. She went to comb her hair, undoing the three braids gathered at the back. That was when she became aware of something truly strange.

“What. . . what is this?”

Undone from the braid, her hair spilled down like a wave. She stared. She knew she had red hair, a red that faded at the ends, almost as if bleached. But not this! Where did this bizarre color come from?

It was red, a red steeped in blood, a red changed to a deep, dark crimson. To be called a redhead was one thing, but this was not that! She could not think of what to call it, this impossible, freakish hue. A shudder ran through her. It was the same red color as the coat of the creature in her nightmares.

“What’s the matter?” the old lady asked. When Youko indicated her hair, the lady tilted her head to the side. “Why worry yourself so? There’s nothing strange about it. A tad unusual, perhaps, but pretty enough.”

Youko shook her head, searched in the pocket of her uniform and brought out a small hand mirror. No doubt about it, those scarlet locks were hers alone.

But who was this person peering back at her? For a moment, it didn’t make any sense. She timidly lifted her hand and touched her face. So did the stranger in the reflection. It was her, she realized in amazement.

This is not my face!

Even accounting for the effect that her hair might have on her appearance, this was somebody else's countenance. Its attractiveness was not the problem. The problem was plainly that this face—with its sun-bronzed skin, its deep emerald eyes—was the face of a stranger.

Youko cried out in great alarm. "This isn't me!"

The old lady turned to her with a dubious expression. "What isn't?"

"This! This is not who I am!"

Chapter 12

2-4 The old lady took the mirror from Youko's distracted grasp and calmly examined it. "Nothing wrong with the mirror from what I can tell." She handed it back to Youko.

Now that Youko thought about it, her voice sounded different too. She had become a completely different person. Not a beast or a monster, but. . . .

"Well, then, so you don't look exactly like you used to."

The laughter in the old lady's voice made Youko look at her. "But why?" she asked. She again peered at herself in the mirror. It gave her a strange sensation, seeing that stranger in place of herself.

"Why, indeed. Not something I'm bound to know."

With that, she took hold of Youko's hand, and with a wetted cloth, dabbed at the many small wounds.

When Youko looked more closely at the her inside the mirror, she could begin to tease out the vestiges of herself that seemed familiar. But they were very faint.

Youko put down the mirror, resolved not to pick it up again. As long as she didn't look, it wouldn't matter what she looked like. True, mirror or not, she couldn't very well ignore her hair, but if she pretended it was dyed, she could put up with it. That didn't mean she was resigned to every other aspect of her appearance, but at this point, she didn't have the courage to take an unvarnished look at herself.

The old lady said, "Can't claim to know much about it myself, but it happens, or so I've heard. Sooner or later, you'll settle down and get used to it."

She took the bucket off the table. In its place, she placed a large bowl. It contained something like *mochi* rice immersed in soup.

"Go on, help yourself. There's plenty more to be had."

Youko shook her head. She had no appetite whatsoever.

"You're not going to eat?"

"I don't want any."

"Give it a taste and see. Sometimes that's the only way to know if you're really hungry or not."

Youko silently shook her head. The old lady sighed. From an earthenware teapot that resembled a tall water jug, she poured a cup of tea.

"You come from over yonder?" she asked. She drew up a chair and sat down.

Youko raised her eyes. "Over yonder?"

"Across the sea. You come from across the *Kyokai*, did you?"

"What's the *Kyokai*?"

"The sea at the foot of the cliffs. The Sea of Emptiness, the sea as black as night."



So it was called the Kyokai. Youko tucked the word away in her mind.

The old lady put a box with an ink-stone on the table and spread out a sheet of paper. She took a writing brush out of the box and held it out to Youko.

“What’s your name?”

Youko pushed aside her mounting confusion, obediently took the brush and wrote down her name:

“Youko Nakajima.”

“Oh, yes, a Japanese name.”

Youko asked, “This is China, isn’t it?”

The old lady cocked her head to the side. “This is Kou (巧). Specifically, the Kingdom of Kou.” She picked up another brush and wrote out the characters.

“This is the town of Hairou (配浪). Hairou is in Shin (鄉槓), a county of Rokou (廬江). Rokou is a prefecture of Fuyou (符楊), which is a district in Jun (淳). Jun is a province in the Kingdom of Kou. I am one of the elders of Hairou.”

Her style of writing was only subtly different from the Japanese, Youko knew. Even the Chinese characters looked pretty much the same.

“That’s *kanji*, right?”

“If you mean what I’m writing, then that’s what it is. How old are you?”

“I’m sixteen. So what are the kanji for Kyokai (虚海)?”

“It’s the Sea (海, *kai*) of Emptiness (虚, *kyo*). What’s your occupation?”

“I’m a student.”

The old lady paused upon hearing Youko’s answer. “Well, you can speak, and you do know your letters. So, besides that strange sword of yours, what else are you carrying?”

Youko emptied out her pockets: a handkerchief, a comb, the hand mirror, a notebook, and a broken watch. That was it. After a cursory examination, the old lady asked what each one was or meant. She shook her head, sighed again, and deposited everything in the pockets of her dress.

“Um. . . what’s going to happen to me next?”

“Well. That’s to be decided by my superiors.”

“Did I do something wrong?”

They sure were treating her like a criminal, Youko thought. But the old lady shook her head.

“Don’t mean you’ve done a thing wrong. It’s just that all *kaikyaku* (海客) got to go see the governor. That’s the way it is. No need for you to go jumping to conclusions.”

“Kaikyaku?”

“Means the visitors (客, *kyaku*) from across the sea (海, *kai*). They say they come in from the east over the Kyokai. They say that at the eastern edge of the Kyokai, there’s a country called Japan. No person has ever seen it for himself, but it must be true, what with so many of them ending up here.”

The old lady looked right at Youko, “Sometimes those Japanese people are swallowed up in a *shoku* and wash up right on our shores. Like you. That’s what the *kaikyaku* are.”

“Shoku?”

“It’s written with the same character as ‘eclipse’ (蝕). It’s a tempest, a great storm, but it’s different from a storm. It’s there in the blink of an eye, and then gone in an instant. Afterwards, that’s when the kaikyaku appear.”

Then she added with an uneasy laugh, “Most of them are long dead. And even if they’re living, they don’t last long. But, still, we take them to the governor. There’s lot of very smart people up there who’ll figure out what to do with you, too.”

“Like what?”

“Like what, you ask? Frankly, I wouldn’t know. The last time a living kaikyaku came ashore in these parts was back in my grandmother’s day, and the word was that he died even before he got taken to the prefecture seat. A lucky girl you are, making it this far and not being drowned along the way.”

“But. . . .”

“What, child?”

“But exactly where am I?”

“The province of Jun, I told you. Here.” The old lady pointed to the list of place names she had written down.

“That’s not what I mean!”

She turned and pleaded with the old lady, who looked back at her with wide eyes. “I don’t know anything about this Kyokai. I don’t know what kingdom the Kingdom of Kou is. I don’t know anything about this world! What is going on?”

The old lady had no answer except a troubled sigh.

“Tell me how to get back home.”

“Can’t be done.”

The abrupt answer made Youko wring her hands together. “It can’t?”

“No human being can cross the Kyokai. No matter how they somehow arrive here, there’s no going back.

This explanation did not satisfy her in the least. “No going back? That’s just stupid.”

“It’s impossible.”

“But. . . I. . . .” Tears welled up in her eyes. “But what about my mom and dad? I didn’t go home last night. I missed school today. I have to go to school. Everybody’s going to be worried.”

It was an awkward moment. The old lady averted her gaze. She stood up and began arranging the things on the table. She said, “Probably better you get used to things being the way they are.”

“But coming here wasn’t my idea! I had nothing to do with it!”

“That’s what all kaikyaku say.”

“My whole life is there. I didn’t bring anything with me. Why can’t I go home? I. . . .”

No more words came. She burst into loud sobs. The old lady paid her no mind. She left the room. Everything she brought with her, she took with her, even the candle, leaving Youko alone in the pitch black cell. The sound of the locking bolts echoed in the dark.

Youko screamed, “I want to go home!”

But it was too hard to carry on in such distress. She curled up on the bed and wept. She finally cried herself to exhaustion.

And slept without dreams.

Chapter 13

2-5 “Get up.”

Youko was roused from sleep. Her eyelids were heavy from weeping. Hard sunlight stung her eyes. Fatigue and hunger left her drained, but she still had no desire to eat.

The men woke her up then bound her—not too tightly—with a length of rope and led her outside. When they emerged from the building, there was a wagon waiting in the plaza, harnessed to a team of two horses.

She was hoisted onto the horse cart. From this vantage point, she could see around the plaza. Here and there and on the street corners, crowds of people had gathered and were staring at her.

Where, she wondered, had all these people been hiding? Yesterday, the place had looked like nothing more than the deserted ruins of a town.

They appeared Oriental, though the color of their hair was markedly different. With so many of them together, it made quite the human kaleidoscope. Every person wore a mixed expression of curiosity and hatred. They really did see her as a criminal getting shipped off in a paddy wagon.

In the fleeting moment in time between when she had opened her eyes until she had truly woken up, she had prayed from the heart to make it all a dream. The dream was shattered by those men dragging her out of the cell.

They hadn't given her any time to tend to her dress or appearance. Her school uniform was still drenched with the stench of the ocean from when they had plunged into the whirlpool in the sea.

Another man climbed into the wagon next to her. The driver loosened the reins. Sizing up the two of them, Youko's only thought was, God, she was dying for a bath, dying to immerse her body in the steaming water, wash herself with sweet-smelling soap, dress in fresh pajamas and go to sleep in her own bed. And wake up and eat the food her mother made, go to school, meet her friends, and talk about all the dumb stuff that didn't matter to anybody.

It occurred to her that she hadn't finished her chemistry homework. A book she'd borrowed from the library was overdue. Her favorite TV show, that she'd been watching forever, was on last night and she'd missed it. She hoped her mother remembered to tape it for her.

Dwelling on it now, it was all so pointless. The tears welled up again. Youko hastily hung her head. She wanted to bury her head in her hands, but with her hands bound. . . .

Better you get used to things being the way they are.

No, she couldn't accept that. Keiki never said she couldn't go back home. It couldn't go on like this. It couldn't. Not being able to wash or put on clean clothes. Tied up like a criminal, hauled along in the back of this filthy wagon. She knew she was no saint, but she didn't deserve to be treated like this!

Glancing back at the gate receding behind them, she hunched her bound arms and wiped her cheek on her shoulder.

The man next to her—she guessed he was in his thirties—clutched a sack to his chest and gazed blankly at the passing scene. “Um. . .” Youko asked him timidly, “where are we going?”

The man looked at her a suspiciously. “You talking to me?”

“Um, yes. . . where are we going?”

“Where? To the county seat. You’re going to see the governor.”

“And after that? Will there be, like, a trial or something?” She couldn’t shake that feeling of being branded a criminal.

“Oh, they’ll shut you up someplace safe until they figure whether you’re a good kaikyaku or a bad kaikyaku.”

The bluntness of the statement made Youko turn her head. “Good kaikyaku or bad kaikyaku?”

“Yeah. If you’re a good kaikyaku, you get yourself a guardian and you get to live someplace. If you’re a bad kaikyaku, it’s off to prison, or they just execute you.

Youko reflexively shrank into herself. Cold sweat ran down her back. “Execute. . .?”

“When a bad kaikyaku shows up, everything goes to hell. If bad things start coming and it’s because of you, off with your head.”

“When you say, bad things coming. . . .”

“I mean wars and disasters and hell following after ‘em. If you don’t kill ‘em quick, they’ll wreck the whole kingdom.”

“But how can anybody be sure?”

The man laughed a mean little laugh. “Oh, lock ‘em up for a little while and you find out quick enough. You show up and bad stuff starts to happen at the same time, that means you’re bad seed, no doubt about it.” There was a threatening look in his eyes. “You brought a few disasters along with you, didn’t you?”

“What do you mean. . .?”

“That shoku that sent you here. You know how many farms got buried in the mudslides? This year’s harvest in Hairou is going to be a complete bust.”

Youko closed her eyes. *Oh, yes, that*, she thought. That’s why they were treating her this way. To these villagers, she had become an omen of doom.

The thought of death frightened her to the core. The thought of being killed, even more so. If she were to die in a foreign place like, this no one would weep for her, or miss her. Her parents could not even claim her body.

How did it come to this?

At any rate, she could not believe that this was her fate. The day before yesterday, she left home just like on any other day. “Later,” she had said to her mother. The day had begun like always, it should have ended like always. Where had everything gone wrong?

She probably shouldn’t have approached those villagers. She should have been more patient and stayed there by the cliffs. She should have stuck it out with those who brought her here—or for that matter, not gone anywhere with them in the first place.

But she didn’t exactly have a whole wide range of choices open to her. Keiki told her she was coming with him whether she liked it or not. Then they were pursued by those monsters. She had done what she had to do to protect herself.

It was like she’d been lured into some kind of trap. On that perfectly ordinary morning, the snare had already been set. In the hours that followed, the noose had drawn closed. By the time she noticed that anything was amiss it was too late, there was no way out.

I’ve got to get out of here.

Youko checked her growing desire to spring into action right then and there. There was no room for failure. If she blew her chance at a clean getaway, she could not imagine how they'd make her pay. She had to pick the moment and get herself the hell out of here.

Thoughts and ideas were spinning around like crazy inside her head to a degree she'd never experienced before in her life.

"Um. . . how long will it take to get to the county seat?"

"By wagon, about half a day."

Youko raised her head. The sky was the kind of clean blue you see after a hurricane. The sun was directly above. She'd have to make a break for it before the sun set. She had no idea what the county seat would be like, but no doubt escaping it would be a lot harder than this horse cart.

"What about my things?"

The man looked suspiciously at Youko. "Everything a kaikyaku brings gets turned in. Them's the rules."

"The sword, too?"

The man again flashed her a distrusting look. She took it as a warning. "What you asking for?"

"Because it's important to me."

She lightly clasped her hands behind her back. "The man who caught me, he wanted it real bad. It's such a relief to know it didn't get stolen."

The man sniffed. "Useless crap. We'll hand it over like we're supposed to."

"Yeah, it's just an ornament, but it's got to be worth a lot of money."

The man looked into her face, then opened the cloth sack on his knees. The jeweled sword buried within gleamed and sparkled.

"This is an ornament?"

"That's right."

Being this close to the sword made her feel that much better. But Youko focused instead on the man. He put his hand on the hilt. *Go ahead*, she urged him, *try and pull it out*. That man back in the field, he hadn't been able to. Keiki said that only she could wield the sword. Perhaps it was true that no one besides her could, but she wanted to be sure.

He put all his effort into it. The hilt didn't budge from the scabbard even a fraction of an inch.

"Please, give it back to me."

He laughed to scorn at Youko's request. "Like I told you, it gets turned over to the authorities. Besides, it won't do you much good, what with your head chopped off. No matter how much you want to look, you can't see much with your eyes shut."

Youko bit her lip. If it were not for these ropes, the sword would be hers. Perhaps Jouyuu could help her out, she thought. But as much as she tried, the cords would not give. Not even Jouyuu could give her supernatural powers.

Glancing about for some way to cut the rope and get hold of the sword, a flash of gold in the passing terrain caught her eye.

The horse cart turned onto a mountain road. There, amongst the rows of trees neatly arrayed in the dark forest, she recognized a familiar color. She opened her eyes wider. At the same time, Jouyuu sent his presence crawling across her skin.

There was a person in the forest. A person with long golden hair, a pale face, wearing a robe that resembled a long *kimono*.

Keiki.

As Youko whispered his name, a voice she knew that was not her own echoed inside her head.

Taiho.

Chapter 14

2-6 “Stop!”

Youko leaned forward and shouted, “Keiki! Help me!”

“What the . . .!” The man next to her grabbed her shoulders and shoved her down.

Youko whirled around. “Stop the wagon! There’s somebody I know out there!”

“There’s nobody you know here.”

“He was just there! It’s Keiki! Please, stop!”

The horses slowed their gait.

The golden light was already in the distance. But she saw enough to know that there was definitely somebody there, that next to him was another person, and that person was wearing a dark cloak over his head like the grim reaper, that he had gathered about him a number of beasts.

“Keiki!”

As she turned and called out, the man yanked back on Youko’s shoulders. She fell hard on her behind. When she raised her head again, the golden light was gone. She could see the place where it had been, but the people there had vanished.

“Keiki!”

“Enough already!” the man said, roughly shaking her. “There’s nobody there! Quit trying to play us!”

“He was there!”

“Shut yer mouth!”

Youko cringed. The horse cart continued on its way. Youko cast a resigned glance back behind her. Of course, there was nobody there.

Why?

The voice she had heard, in the instant she believed she had seen Keiki, it had surely been Jouyuu’s. So it must have been Keiki. She had seen his fellow creatures as well. So they must be okay.

But then why didn’t he help me?

Wracking her thoughts in confusion, she let her gaze wander. But she couldn’t see that golden glow anywhere.

At that moment, from within the forest came a cry.

Youko stared at where the sound was coming from. So did the man next to her. It was the cry of a baby. They were hearing the spasmodic wailing of a child.

The driver had up to that point said nothing, only driven the wagon forward. He shot the two of them a look and loosened the reins. The horses quickened their pace.

“Hey. . . .” His companion pointed off in the direction of the crying. “But it’s a baby.”

“Don’t care. You hear a baby crying here in the mountains, that’s good reason to keep your distance.”

“But, still. . . .”

The baby began wailing like it was being scalded, a pressing, urgent cry that no human could bear to ignore. The man continued to search for the source of the sound, leaning out over the side of the wagon. The driver snapped, “Pay it no mind. I’ve heard there’s man-eating *youma* (妖魔) in these mountains that’ll howl just like a baby crying.”

Youko felt herself tense up at the mention of the word. *Youma. Demons.*

The man frowned, looking at the woods and then at the driver. With a hard expression on his face, the driver snapped the reins again. The wagon began to bounce and sway along the hill road. The forest crowded the trail on both sides, shadowing it in gloom.

For a brief moment, Youko had believed that Keiki was going to save her, but Jouyuu’s presence was growing more intense; her entire body was tensing up to an alarming degree. There was no way he’d be like this if he was simply happy that they were about to be rescued.

The baby’s keening voice was suddenly much closer and clearly getting closer. Answering it, a cry came from the opposite direction. Then the wailing was all about them. Circling the wagon, the high-pitched voices reverberated down the hill road.

“God!” The man’s body went rigid as he scanned the surroundings. The horse cart sped along at an increasingly heedless pace. The wailing rang out again, nearer. Not that of a baby. Not that of a child. Youko shuddered, her pulse raced. The sensation she was feeling permeated her body. This time it was not Jouyuu’s presence, it was more like the roar of the ocean.

She shouted, “Untie me!”

The man looked at Youko and shook his head.

“If we’re attacked, do you have any way to protect yourself?”

Flustered by the question, he could only shake his head.

“Then untie me. And give me that sword. Please.”

The ring of cries encircling the horse cart was contracting. The horses were at full gallop. The wagon leapt and bounded as if trying to buck off its passengers.

“Hurry up!” Youko screamed. The man made as if to hit her. That’s when it happened. A huge crash. She was catapulted into the air.

She hit the ground hard, vaguely realizing that the cart had tipped over. Catching her breath, choking down a wave of nausea, she looked up to see that the horses and wagon had toppled sideways in a complete wreck.

The man with the cloth sack had been thrown a short distance from her. He sat up, shaking his head. He still had the sack clutched tightly to his chest. The baby cries rang from out the edge of the forest.

“Please! Untie me!”

A horse let loose a wrenching scream. Youko turned with panicked eyes. A huge black dog was attacking one of the team. The dog had a hugely overdeveloped jaw. When it opened its mouth, it looked like its head was splitting in two. Its muzzle was white. A second later it was crimson. The man shrieked.

“Untie me and give me that sword!”

He was deaf to her pleas. Trembling, he clambered to his feet. Clutching the sack, free hand clawing at the sky, he stumbled down the hill.

Four black beasts sprang from the woods, bounding through the air after him. Man and beasts became one. Then the beasts alighted on the ground, leaving the frozen form of the man behind.

No, he wasn't petrified with fear. He was missing an arm. And his head. A moment later, the body toppled over. A fountain of blood sprayed forth, painting the ground around him with a rainfall of red. Behind Youko, a horse screamed, a high-pitched neigh.

Youko took cover behind the wagon. Her shoulder touched something, making her start and twist around. It was the driver. He grabbed Youko's bound hands. She saw he was holding a small knife.

"Don't run," he said. "If we go now, we can slip by the bastards."

He undid the cords binding Youko's hands and started down the hill, marching her in front him. One horde of beasts was gathered around the horse at the crest of the hill. At the bottom of the hill, another crowded around the fallen man, forming a small black mound over the body. His only recognizable feature, his head, lay a few feet away.

Youko shrank back from this scene of sudden slaughter. It was happening to somebody else, not to her. But her now unfettered body was preparing for battle. She scooped up some nearby stones and picked one out.

What am I supposed to do with these pebbles?

She straightened, faced the bottom of the hill. She could see the man's leg jerking in gory syncopation to the sound of frenzied feeding coming from the furry swarm. She counted the pelts. Six altogether.

Youko approached the pack. The baby-like mewling had ceased. The air was filled with the sound of crunching bone and muscle. One of the dogs suddenly raised its head, its muzzle stained with blood. As if called to one by one, each of the animals raised its head in succession.

Now what?

She charged forward at a small run. The first dog came at her. She hit it squarely in the nose with a stone. Not hard enough to knock it down, but enough to make it hesitate in its stride.

This isn't going to work.

The pack drew back, exposing the form of what had not yet ceased to be recognizable as the body of a man.

I'm going to die here.

She'd be devoured like him. Their jaws and fangs would tear her to pieces, into lumps of meat, and they'd wolf her down.

Even as she was assaulted by such hopeless thoughts, Youko drove the dogs back with the stones and set off at a run. Once Jouyuu had been roused to action, there was no stopping him. The best she could do was get out of his way and pray the end would be quick and painless.

She ran, sharp shocks of pain radiating down her legs and arms and back.

Looking back over her shoulder for help, she saw the driver running towards the forest in the opposite direction, madly flailing about with the knife. Just as he plunged into the undergrowth, he was dragged down into the shadow of the trees.

She asked herself why he had headed off like that and immediately understood that he had intended to use her as a decoy. While the dogs were busy attacking her, he'd slip away into the woods. It hadn't turned out the way he'd planned. It hadn't occurred to him that they'd go after him instead.

She was running out of stones. She was three paces from the dead man's corpse.

A beast came at her from the right. She smacked it in the snout with her free hand. Another nipped at her ankles, rose up and almost bowled her over. She skipped, stumbled, was hit again hard in the back, lurched forward and plowed head-on into the dead man's body.

Oh, gross.

She didn't scream. She was too numb by now. She felt only a mild repulsion. She righted herself, turned in a crouch, braced herself. She didn't think it'd do much good to try and stare these monsters down, but, surprisingly, they lowered their heads and held their distance. Still, she couldn't keep this up forever.

Youko worked her right hand under the corpse, searching amongst the mangled flesh. Fresh in her mind's eye was the fact that he had been alive one moment, dead the next. She was out of time. Once the pack made their decision, it'd be all over.

She felt something hard at her fingertips. The hilt of the sword practically jumped into her hand. An inarticulate thrill shot through her.

She seized her lifeline. But when she tried to extract the scabbard, halfway out, it got stuck on something. She was told to never separate the sword from its scabbard. She hesitated, but she didn't have time to hesitate. She slipped the sword out of the scabbard. With the tip of the blade, she cut the cords holding the jewels, clasped them in the palm of her hand.

The dogs made their move. The first one charged into her field of vision. Her right arm moved, the sword flashed.

"AYAAAAA!!" An inarticulate cry tore from her throat.

The dogs came at her from the left, from the right. She cut them down, opened up a gap in the throng, plunged through and ran. They charged after her again. She slashed and retreated, and then with all the energy left in her body, fled the scene.

Chapter 15

2-7 Youko sat down against the fat trunk of a tree.

Halfway down the hill, she had cut off the path into the mountains. Here was where her legs finally gave out.

She raised her sleeve to wipe away the sweat on her brow. The fabric of her *seifuku* uniform was heavy with blood. She grimaced, peeled off her jacket and used it to wipe down the sword. She held the blade up in front of her eyes.

She recalled reading in her history class that you could kill only so many people with a Japanese sword before the blood and gore dulled its effectiveness. She was sure that the sword must have been damaged during the melee, and carefully buffed the metal until there was not a shadow left on the steel.

"Strange. . . ."

Strange that only she could draw the sword. When she had first taken hold of it, it had seemed heavy in her hands. But now, free of the scabbard, it was as light as a feather.

Having restored the glitter to the razor-sharp edge, Youko wrapped the sword in her jacket. She took a minute to organize her thoughts.

She had left the scabbard behind. Perhaps she should go back and get it.

Never separate the sword from the scabbard. So she was told, but was that because the scabbard itself had any special value? Or was it because of the jewels attached to it?

The T-shirt she wore under her uniform jacket was soaked with sweat. It was getting cold, but she couldn't stomach putting on that bloody jacket. Now that she had the time to sit and think about it, her body really hurt. Her arms and legs were covered with wounds.

There were teeth marks through the sleeves of her T-shirt. Blood welled up under the T-shirt, spotting the white cloth.

Her skirt was torn, her legs etched with countless lacerations. Most were still oozing blood, but compared to the kind of damage those fangs could do—that took that man's head off just like that—these were pretty minor cuts and bruises.

Again, strange. There was no way she should have come out of it like this. Though now that she thought about it, when they were in the vice-principal's office and the window shattered, everybody around her was hurt while nothing happened to her. And when she had fallen from Hyouki's back onto the beach, she'd suffered little more than a few bumps and bruises.

It was all so weird, though considering that even her physical appearance had changed, it wasn't any more weird than anything else that happened to her.

Whatever, she sighed. She took a few more deep breaths. She noticed that her left hand was still clenched into a fist. She uncurled her stiff fingers. The blue-green jewels tumbled out. Closing her hand around them again, it was clear that the jewels were alleviating the pain.

She held the jewels tightly and dozed off for a while. When she awoke, all her wounds had clotted and closed.

"This is so weird. . . ."

The gnawing pain, once enough to bring tears to her eyes, was gone. She felt only a light fatigue. She was definitely not going to lose those jewels, the one thing in her life she was definitely thankful for. That must have been why they had told her it was so important to not lose the scabbard.

She removed the kerchief from the collar of her *seifuku* jacket, and with the sword, cut from it a thin strip of cloth. Tightly twisting it, she threaded the strip of cloth through the holes in the jewels and hung them around her neck.

"Jouyuu," she said, directing her attention inwardly. There was no reply.

"I have a question. Say something."

He did not answer.

"What am I supposed to do now? I mean, where should I go?"

No voice answered her. She knew he was there. She concentrated her thoughts, focused her attention, but she felt no evidence of his presence. She heard something like the faint rustle of leaves, but all she felt was silence.

"Hey, a right or a left would be fine by me!"

Youko continued on in her monologue. “Look, I don’t know the first thing about this place, okay? I’m just asking for a little advice, that’s all. If I go someplace where there’s a lot of people, I’ll probably get arrested again, right? And if I get arrested, I’m as good as dead. So I keep on running and make sure I don’t meet anybody, then what? Should I be looking for some magical door that’ll take back to my own home? Not likely, huh?”

Forget about what she *must* do, she didn’t even have a good idea of what to do next. She wasn’t helping herself at all just sitting here, but it wasn’t like she had anyplace to go, either.

The dusk was falling fast in the forest. She didn’t have any kind of light, nothing that could be called a bed. Nothing to eat, nothing to drink. It was too dangerous to go near cities or towns, and wandering around in the wilderness wasn’t exactly safe, either.

“All I want to know is what to do next! At the very least, could you give me a hint or two?”

As expected, there was no reply.

“What the hell is going on? What happened to Keiki and everybody? That was him back there, wasn’t it? What’d he just disappear for? Why didn’t he help me? Why?”

Only the rustling of leaves answered her.

“I’m begging you. Can’t you say anything?”

The tears welled up. “I want to go home. . . .”

She couldn’t say she loved the life she had been living. But now that she was separated from that life, she missed it so badly it hurt. She’d do anything to be back home again. If she could go home, she’d never leave again.

“I wanna go home.”

As she sobbed like a child, a thought occurred to her. She’d escaped. She’d escaped from getting shipped off to the governor, from getting eaten by those dogs. She’d come this far and she’d survived. She hugged her knees to her chest.

But was she really any better off?

If it hurts so bad. . . .

She shook her head, pushed away the thoughts welling up in her mind. It was too scary to think of things like that, thoughts more persuasive than any words. She hugged her knees more tightly.

That was when, out of the blue, she heard the voice. A strange, high-pitched voice, laughing like an old man, laughing at the thoughts she was trying so hard to resist.

“If it hurts so bad, why, it could all be over in an instant.”

Youko scanned her surroundings. Her right hand was at once on the hilt of the sword. The forest was black with the night. There was only enough light to make out the height of the undergrowth and trees.

From the midst of the night came a dim glow, maybe two meters from where Youko was sitting, a thin, blue phosphorescence radiating through the undergrowth.

Gazing at the light, Youko gasped, caught her breath. It was a monkey, its fur shining like foxfire. Only its head appeared, parting the tall weeds. He looked at Youko and bared his teeth and laughed, a screeching laugh that grated at her ears.

“If they had eaten you up, it would have all been over before you knew it!”

Youko drew the sword out from her jacket. “What. . . are you?”

The monkey laughed its screechy laugh again. “I am what I am. Silly little girl, running away, are we? If they’d gobbled you down like that, well, there’d be no more of these unpleasant thoughts.”

Youko raised the sword. “Who are you?”

“But I told you, did I not? I am who I am. Your ally. I thought to tell you some nice things for a change.”

“Nice things. . .?”

She didn’t buy a word he was saying. Jouyuu exhibited no tension or concern, so she did not think he was an enemy. But his strange appearance convinced her that he couldn’t possibly be a normal living thing.

“There is no going home for you, little girl.”

Youko glared at him hard. “Shut up,” she spat back.

“Oh, no, you can’t go home. Absolutely, positively not. Because there’s absolutely, positively no way for you to do so, now, is there? Shall I tell you something nice?”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Oh, I shall tell you anyway. You, little girl, you have been royally taken in.” The monkey let loose a shriek of laughter

“T-taken in?” It felt like getting doused with cold water.

“You’re such a silly girl, now, aren’t you? It was a trap right from the start, don’t you know.”

Her breath stopped in her throat. *A trap.* Whose trap? Keiki’s? Keiki’s trap? The hand holding the sword began to shake, but she could not find the words to deny what the monkey was saying.

“You knew it all along, didn’t you? He brought you *here*, and there is no going back *there*. That’s the trap, don’t you see?”

The monkey’s piercing laugh stabbed at her ears.

“Stop it!”

She swung the sword blindly. The tips of the grass danced with a dull, dry *whish*. For all her reckless effort, the flailing tip of the sword failed to reach the monkey.

“Now, now, not listening to the truth won’t change things a bit. You go waving that thing like that, well, you’re going to hurt yourself.”

“Stop it!”

“And what a fine piece of work it is, indeed. Why not put it to even better use? Off with her head! A do-it-yourself job!” The monkey threw his head back towards the heavens and shrieked hysterically.

“Shut up!”

She lunged, but the monkey was no longer there just beyond the tip of the sword. He was a little further off, still only his disembodied head visible.

“Now, now, do you really want to kill me? After all, if I wasn’t here, you wouldn’t have anyone at all to talk to.”

The raw truth of the statement struck like a blow.

“Have I done you wrong? Have I not most politely deigned to converse with you?”

Youko held her temper, squeezed her eyes shut.

“Oh, yes, poor, poor pitiful you, being hauled off to such a place as this.”

“What should I do. . .?”

“I can’t see as there’s anything you can do.”

“I don’t want to die.” The mere thought was still too dreadful to contemplate.

“Do whatever strikes your fancy, then. I don’t wish you to die either, little girl.”

“Where should I go?”

“Does it really matter? It really can’t, not when you’re being chased by both people and youma.”

Youko buried her face in her hands. The tears welled up.

“That’s right, little girl. Cry while you can. Before you know it, there won’t be any tears left.”

The monkey laughed his high, chirpy laugh. The sound of his laughter was farther away. Youko lifted her head. “Wait!”

She didn’t want it to leave her. He might be a complete unknown, but it was better having someone, anyone to talk to than being lost and alone in this place.

By the time she had raised her head to look he was gone. She heard only the screeches of laughter fading into the distance, echoing in the pitch black darkness.

Chapter 16

2-8 *If it hurts so much, it could be over in an instant.*

The monkey’s words rested heavy on her heart. She could not dismiss them from her mind. Neither could she tear her eyes away from the sword resting on her knees. It lay there, cold and hard, glimmering in the barely perceptible light.

If it hurts. . . .

She could take the thoughts no further. She shook her head, cast them aside. She couldn’t go back. She couldn’t go forward. She just sat there and stared at the sword.

After a while, the blade began to throw off a faint but discernable glow. Youko opened her eyes wider. Slowly, the white outline of the sword emerged in the dark. Youko picked it up and held it out in front of her. The sword cast a brilliant glitter into the night. The flat of the double-edged blade was as wide as her fingers. She concentrated her attention on the curious colors dancing up and down its length.

She gathered that it was an image of some sort being projected by the sword itself. At first, she thought it was herself, but realized that it was not. When she looked closer at the blade, she saw it was the silhouette of a person, of somebody working.

She heard a familiar sound. The high, clear sound of water, of a drop striking the surface of calm pool. As she concentrated, the projection from the sword came clearer. The notes sounded and the image drew into focus, like the ripples drawn across the mirrored surface of a pond gently subsiding.

It was a woman, a woman busying about in a room.

Youko grasped what she was looking at. Her eyes brimmed with tears.

“Mom. . . .”

It was true. The person she was seeing was her mother, and the room she was seeing was her own room. The wallpaper with the ivory pattern on a white background, the curtains arrayed with a design of small flowers. The patchwork comforter on her bed. The stuffed dolls on the bookshelf. On her desk, *The Long Winter* by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Her mother walked aimlessly around her room, touching things here and there. She went to pick up a book, flip through the pages; went to open a drawer, maybe to look inside, but then sat down on the bed and sighed.

Mom. . . .

Her mother looked tired. The gaunt expression on her face made Youko's chest hurt. Her mother really was worried about her. Two days had passed since Youko had left. Not once had she even been late for dinner without informing them of her whereabouts beforehand.

One by one, her mother picked up the stuffed dolls arranged along the edge of the bed and gently petted them. Then she lay back, clasping the doll, and burst in muffled sobs.

Youko couldn't help herself. "Mom!" she called out, as if she were there in the room with her.

As soon as she spoke, the scene ended. She suddenly came back to herself. Her eyes refocused. All she saw was the sword. The glittering light was gone, she could see nothing in the blade. The sound of falling water ceased.

"What was that?"

What in the world had she been looking at, she wondered. It looked so real. She again held out the sword in front of her. No matter how much she concentrated, the images did not reappear. Nor did she hear that sound of water.

The sound of a falling drop of water.

She remembered.

It was the sound she had heard in her dreams. The dreams that had gone on for a month. That same high sound of falling water had accompanied them. Those dreams had become reality. But what about the vision she had just seen? The more she thought about it, the less she understood it. She shook her head. No, she had seen her mother because she wanted so badly to go home.

She looked off in the direction the monkey had vanished.

You can't go back. It was a trap.

If that was true, all her hopes were in vain. But it wasn't a trap. Surely, even if Keiki hadn't been able to help her, that didn't mean he had abandoned her.

No. . . she hadn't clearly seen his face. She could have been mistaken. Maybe it wasn't him at all.

"That must be it."

It *looked* like Keiki, but it wasn't him. People around here had hair in all kinds of colors. She thought it was Keiki because he had blond hair, but she hadn't clearly seen his face. And now that she thought about it, the figure of the man she had seen was a little bit smaller than Keiki.

"Yes, yes, that's what happened."

It wasn't Keiki after all. Keiki simply wouldn't have deserted her like that. If she could only find Keiki, she was sure she could go home again.

She firmly clenched the hilt of the sword. A series of sensations scurried down her spine.

"Jouyuu?"

Her body roused itself of its own accord. She undid the jacket wound around the sword and cast it aside, and prepared herself. "What is it?" she asked, knowing there would be no answer, her eyes scanning the surroundings. Her pulse raced.

From ahead of her came the dry *whush* of something pushing its way through the underbrush. That *something* was coming her way. The next thing she heard was a howl, as when a dog marks its territory for all within earshot.

Those dogs.

The same dogs that had attacked earlier?

In any case, she was at a clear disadvantage fighting in this darkness. She cast a glance behind her. She had to find someplace where there was even a little bit more light. She moved with careful steps, relying on Jouyuu's promptings to guide her. She took off at a sprint. At the same time, behind her, that big *something* broke free of the undergrowth and rushed after her.

Youko ran through the black forest. Her pursuer should have been fast enough to overtake her, but was not quick enough or smart enough. As she dashed from tree to tree, she could hear its heavy mass lurching from side to side, and the occasional thud as it collided hard against a trunk of a tree.

She ran towards the light, bounded out of the forest.

She found herself on a terrace that jutted out from the deforested side of the mountain, bathed in white moonlight. Below her, an unbroken view of a range of gently rolling mountains opened up. Cursing that this was not a level and open field, she turned and steeled herself. With a great crash, the huge shadow charged into the clearing.

It resembled a big bull with a long shaggy coat that rolled in waves as it breathed. It growled at her like a Doberman.

She felt neither panic nor surprise. Her heart raced, her breath burned in her throat, but any fear she might have towards this strange beast faded away. She focused her attention on Jouyuu's whisperings. Her body filled with the roar of the ocean. Yet she couldn't help thinking, *God, I hate getting blood all over me.*

She lost track of time. The moon rose high in the sky. The silver sword gleamed in the clean light of the moon.

And then, under the night sky, it was stained black. Three more blows brought the beast to its knees. As she drew close and delivered the *coup de grâce*, she saw the glowing red eyes gathering around her in the surrounding dark.

She walked only where there was light. Countless times she beat back the attacking youma.

These creatures could not abide the daylight. So they came at her over and over again throughout the night. Though it was not one long continuous battle, the jewels could not stave off her growing fatigue. By the time daylight finally broke over the deserted road, she was jabbing the sword into the ground and using it like a cane. Walking hurt like hell.

It grew brighter and the attacks came farther apart. With the first rays of the sun, they ceased completely. She wanted to collapse there at the side of the trail, but it'd be dangerous if anybody came across her there. Dragging her aching limbs, she crawled in amongst the trees shouldering the road and found a patch of soft ground cover. She clasped the sword to her chest and fell into a deep sleep.

Part III

Chapter 17



ouko awoke towards the evening. She walked about aimlessly during the day, spent the night fighting the youma. She slept amidst the underbrush, ate what edible nuts and berries she could find. Three days went by the same way.

She was so exhausted that she had no problem sleeping. Sleep did not address her growing hunger, though. She didn't feel like she was starving to death as long as she held the jewels, but that didn't fill her belly. Her body felt as if it was being gnawed away from the inside out by thousands of little worms.

On the fourth day, she gave up on the idea of walking around without any destination or direction. She still had no idea of which way to go. She'd been operating on the expectation that she would eventually run into what she was looking for. Now she had to face the fact that she was simply going around in circles. She wasn't going anywhere.

She had to find Keiki. To do that, she had to go where there were people. But once they found out that she was a kaikyaku, they'd lock her up and she'd be right back where she started.

Youko looked herself over. She really had to get herself some different clothes. If she could only change her appearance that way, people probably couldn't tell at a glance that she was a kaikyaku.

The problem was how to get her hands on different clothes. She had no idea what they used for money here, and besides, she didn't have any cash on her. So she wasn't going to be buying anything. Doing things aboveboard, her options were limited. On the other hand, she could threaten people with the sword and take their money.

The logic of a wardrobe change dawned upon her pretty quickly. Actually robbing somebody, that was another story. But wandering around in the mountains for four days had made up her mind for her. She had to stay alive. That didn't mean killing people and robbing their bodies. She was approaching the limit of what she would hesitate doing.

From the shadow of a large tree, Youko looked down at the small village. The village was a collection of humble dwellings crowded together in the center of a narrow valley.

Mustering her courage, she left the shelter of the trees. She approached the nearest house in the village to take a look. Instead of a fence or wall, the house was encompassed by a small garden. The roof was black tile, the white mud walls worn down to the slats.

There was no glass in the windows. The heavy wooden shutters had been left open as well. She drew nearer, scouting out the surroundings. These days, she could look a rabid beast right in the face and not even blink, but right now, if she hadn't been clenching her mouth closed, her teeth would have been chattering.

She snuck a peek in one of the windows. She saw a small dirt floor, a fireplace and table. It had the look of an ordinary kitchen. She didn't see anybody there, heard nothing out of the ordinary.

With muffled steps, she crept along the wall of the house. Next to the well, she came across what she took to be a wooden door. When she pushed on it, it opened, though stubbornly. She held her breath and peered inside. She had by now concluded it was a house and that nobody was home. Slowly letting out her breath, she went inside.

The room was about ten feet by ten feet. The accommodations were modest, but it smelled like a home. Four walls, some furniture, the various implements of daily life. These alone were almost enough to bring her to tears with homesickness.

Upon closer examination, the room otherwise had only a few cupboards. She went to the one door. It opened into a bedroom. There were two beds at opposite ends of the room. A shelf, small table, and a big wooden chest. Apparently these were the only two rooms in the house.

She checked to make sure the window was open, stepped in and closed the door behind her.

First off, she scanned the shelves. She found nothing there. Next, she opened the wooden chest. A variety of cloths and fabrics were packed inside. A second look told her that there was nothing she could wear. A further look around the room revealed nothing else that might contain clothing. With every expectation that in there, somewhere, there must be something to wear, she began pulling everything out, one by one.

The wooden chest was almost as big as a large screen TV. It contained a number of smaller boxes that in turn contained a miscellany of things, sheets and faded quilts and some children's outfits she knew were too small for her.

She couldn't believe there were no clothes that fit her. As she cast about the room again, she heard the front door open. Youko literally jumped, as did her heart. She cast a quick glance at the window. It now seemed miles away. It would not be possible for her to move from where she stood without attracting the attention of the person on the other side of the door.

Don't come in here.

Small footsteps padded about the adjoining room. The bedroom door moved. Youko couldn't. She stood there, frozen in front of the chest, its contents strewn all about her. Reflexively, she went to grasp the handle of the sword, stopped herself.

She stole because that was what she had to do to stay alive. Yes, it would be easy to intimidate people with the sword, but if intimidation didn't work, she'd actually have to use it.

If it hurts so much, it could be over in a moment.

The door opened. A woman started to enter the room, a large-framed woman approaching middle age. Seeing Youko, she stopped and started so violently it was like she was having a convulsion.

Youko had no inclination to run away now. She stood there silently. By the by, her nerves settled and she resigned herself to the inevitable. She'd be arrested and herded off to the county seat and likely be executed. It'd all be over. She could finally forget forever about being hungry and tired.

The woman looked down at the clothing and fabrics scattered about Youko's feet. She said in a trembling voice, "Got nothing here what's worth being stole."

Youko waited for the woman to scream.

“Was it clothes? Was it because you needed something to wear?”

The plainness of the question left Youko too bewildered to reply. The woman took her silence as a yes. She moved from the doorway into the room. “I keep the clothes over here.” She went over to the bed next to Youko, knelt down and drew back the quilt, revealing a drawer underneath. “That box there is for old things I don’t need anymore, like for my child that died.”

She opened the drawer and took out an outfit. “What kind of clothes do you like, then? Don’t have much else besides my own.” She looked up at Youko. Youko stared back at her. When she didn’t answer, the woman held up a kimono. “Too bad my daughter died so young. These are all pretty plain.”

“Why. . .” Youko blurted out. Why didn’t this woman sound the alarm? Why didn’t she run away?

“Why, you ask?” the woman said, turning to Youko. Youko found herself at a loss for words. The woman laughed, a bit stiffly, resumed laying out the kimono. “You come from Hairou?”

“I . . . um. . . .”

“Big fuss there about a kaikyaku running away.”

Youko fell silent. The woman smiled a wry smile. “Lots of hard-headed folk about, that’s for sure. Kaikyaku are going to ruin the kingdom, they say. Kaikyaku do bad things right and left, they say. A *shoku* happens and it’s all because of the kaikyaku, they say. The things fools say.”

She looked Youko over from head to toe. “Where’d that blood on you come from?”

“When I was in the mountains, the youma. . . .” She could say nothing more.

“Ah, you were attacked by the youma, were you? Lots of them about, lately. You seem to have come through well enough.”

The woman got to her feet. “Go on, sit yourself down. You’re a hungry one, I bet. Had anything to eat? You’re looking positively gray.”

Youko could only drop her shoulders and shake her head, no.

“Well, then, let’s have ourselves a bite. I’ll heat up some water and we’ll get all that grime off you. We can decide on what to wear after that.” The woman cheerfully gathered up her things and started to leave. She glanced back at Youko, who still hadn’t moved from where she stood. “Now, what was your name?”

Youko started to answer. No words came out. She sank to her knees, the tears spilling down her cheeks.

“Oh, you poor thing. It’s okay, it’s okay.” The woman spoke in a motherly voice, her warm hand stroking Youko’s back. “It must have been very hard for you out there. You’ll be okay.”

The weight of everything Youko had endured overwhelmed her all at once. The sobs tore at her throat. She curled up on the floor and wept as if the world would end.

Chapter 18

3-2 “Well, then, why don’t you change into this?”

Standing behind a folding screen, the woman handed Youko a nightdress. “You’ll be staying here tonight? You can wear this for the time being.”

Youko bowed her head deeply in gratitude.

The woman consoled the still teary Youko. She prepared rice gruel sweetened with *azuki* beans. Then she filled a big tub with hot water and prepared a bath for Youko. With her long, aching hunger satiated, Youko washed in the hot water, and put on clean nightclothes. She was starting to feel like a real person again.

“I’m really, really thankful for all you’ve done.” Youko came from around the folding screen the woman had set around the tub and bowed again. “I’m so sorry about everything.”

After all, she had tried to steal from this woman.

When Youko looked at her directly, she could see that the woman’s eyes were blue. The woman’s blue eyes softened and she laughed.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Let’s leave it at that. Have something warm to eat. Drink this as well. It’ll help you sleep. I’ve made up your bed.

“I’m sorry.”

“Like I said, not a problem. I hope you don’t mind, but I put away that sword of yours. It was making me uncomfortable.”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, nothing you need to keep apologizing for. Now, I don’t think I caught your name.”

“Youko Nakajima.”

“Kaikyaku do have funny names. You can call me Takki.” She handed Youko a teacup.

Youko took it and asked, “How is your name spelled?”

Takki (達姐) sketched the characters for “achievement” (達, tatsu) and “maidservant” (姐, ki) with her finger on the tabletop. “So, Youko, was there someplace you needed to get yourself to?”

Youko shook her head. “No, no place in particular. Takki-san, have you ever heard of a person named Keiki?”

“Keiki? I don’t know anybody by that name. Are you looking for him?”

“Yes.”

“Where’s he from? Is he from Kou?”

“All I know is that he’s from around here. . . .”

Takki smiled a patient smile. “Now, that’s hardly enough information. Which kingdom and which province, at the very least. Short of that, why, it’s a needle in a haystack.”

Youko hung her head. “The fact is, I don’t know anything about this place.”

“So it seems.” Takki put down her teacup. “We are one of the Twelve Kingdoms. Specifically, the kingdom of the southeast, called the Kingdom of Kou.”

Youko nodded. “And the sun rises in the east?”

“Of course. And this is the eastern part of Kou, called Gosou (五曹). There’s some high mountains a ten-days’ walk north from here. Over those mountains is the Kingdom of Kei (慶). Hairou is due east of us, by the seashore. Following the main road, you can walk there in five days.”

What had been previously completely incomprehensible was bit by bit coming into focus. It was dawning on her that this place was a world unto itself.

“Just how big is Kou?”

Takki tilted her head back and gave it a bit of thought. “How big, she asks me. Well, if you was to walk from the eastern-most border of Kou all the way to the western-most border, I figure it’d take you a good three months.”

“That long?” Youko said, her eyes growing wide. She could not begin to grasp what it meant to walk for that length of time, but she did understand that it was quite beyond her imagination.

“Yes, that long. It might not be such a big place, but Kou is a kingdom. It’s about the same distance north to south as well. But because it means crossing seas or mountains, going to a neighboring kingdom is almost a four month trip.”

“And all the Twelve Kingdoms. . . .”

“That’s right.”

Youko closed her eyes. She had somehow pictured in her mind a world like a small garden. How could she find one person in such a vast place? Without a single clue and only the name “Keiki” to go by? Circumnavigating all twelve kingdoms by itself would take four years.

“What kind of person is this Keiki?”

“I don’t really know. Probably like the people here. He’s the person who brought me here.”

“Brought you here?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s a new one on me.” Takki was visibly impressed.

“Is that unusual?”

Takki said with a severe, little smile, “I don’t have much learning about such things. Don’t know that much about kaikyaku, neither. You hardly ever see them around these parts.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Youko.

“It’s true. In any case, he can’t be any kind of normal person. What you’re talking about, that’s nothing any of us could have done. One of the gods, maybe, or a wizard, or one of the half-demons.”

Youko stared at her. Takki smiled. “Going to that other place, bringing somebody back, it’s not what normal people do. And if it’s not normal people, then it’s got to be a wizard or youma.”

“I know there are youma, but gods and wizards, too?”

“There certainly are. But they live in the world above, apart from the rest of us. The gods and the wizards live up there. They hardly ever come down here.”

“Above?”

“Above the sky. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t wizards down here. From kings to province lords, they’re all up there above the sky.”

When Youko tilted her head quizzically, Takki smiled and explained. “Each of the provinces has a province lord. This is Jun Province. Our province lord is the Marquis of Jun. He rules by will of the king. Normal people don’t become province lords, neither. They never grow old and have supernatural powers. They’re people from out of this world.”

“I wonder if Keiki is a person like that.”

“Could be.”

Takki again smiled her wry smile. “If it’s wizards we’re talking about, I hear that all the people who work at the royal palace, right down to the underlings, they’re wizards of one sort or the other. The same goes for the big government officials. Regular people can’t go that place above the sky because that’s where the royal palace is. The king is one of the gods. The wizards are chosen by the king. Now, there are some folks who manage to pull themselves up there by their own bootstraps, but most of them are recluses, hermit-types. They belong to that other world that we’re not part of. Us and them, like ships in the night.

Youko made careful note of everything that Takki said. There was no telling what aspect of this information might later prove important.

“There’s said to be a dragon king who rules over the ocean, but that may just be fairy tales. If there really was a dragon kingdom, they wouldn’t be normal people, either. Besides them, there’s supposedly youma that can change their appearance to look human. That’s what we call the half-demon. Most of them just look human, but there are some of them that can disguise themselves so that you can’t tell the difference.

Takki poured some more tea from the earthenware teapot. The tea was cold. “They say that the youma have a kingdom of their own somewhere. I can’t say if it’s true or not. At the end of the day, though, what it comes down to is, youma and people, they come from completely different worlds.”

Youko nodded. What she was learning was changing the way she saw things, and things were getting a lot more confusing. Like, Keiki probably wasn’t human. If he wasn’t, what was he? Hyouki and Kaiko and those strange beasts must be some species of youma. If they were, then didn’t it stand to reason that Keiki was a half-demon?

“Um. . . have you ever heard of youma called Hyouki or Kaiko or Jouyuu?”

Takki gave her a funny look. “I haven’t heard of any youma like that. Why do you ask?”

“Or hinman?”

A surprised look came to her face. “Ah, hinman (賓満). The possessor. A youma that possesses warriors on the field of battle. No body except for its red eyes. How did you come to know about a creature like that?”

Youko felt herself shiver. Jouyuu was a youma called the hinman, and even now it possessed her. But admitting that would probably only make Takki think she was weird or something, so she shook her head.

“Or kochou?”

“Kochou (蠱彫).” Takki wrote out the characters for “rice worm” (蠱, ko) and “carve” (彫, chou). “The horned bird. A ferocious animal that eats people. How did you come to know about the kochou?”

“I was attacked by one.”

“Surely not! Where?”

“That other place. . . where I’m from. A kochou attacked us and we had to escape. It appeared out of nowhere, like it was pursuing me and Keiki. We had to come here to keep from getting killed. . . or that’s what Keiki said.”

Takki said in a low voice, “Did such a thing really happen?”

Youko took a deep breath. “It doesn’t sound right?”

“Not right at all. It’s a serious thing for people around here if youma start showing up, even out there in the mountains. Back when, youma didn’t make it a practice of coming around where people are.”

“Really? Is that really true?”

Takki nodded. “But recently, for whatever reason, there’s been a lot more of them. It’s gotten dangerous. After sundown, people don’t dare go outside. But when one of those mean ones, like a kochou appears, what a hullabaloo.”

Takki gave her a stern look. “Youma are like any other wild beast. They’re not the kind of creatures to go chasing after one person in particular, let alone to the other side of the sea. Never before heard of such a thing. You know, Youko, it sounds like you might have met up with something quite serious.”

“I guess I did.”

“Well, it’s not that I’m any kind of expert. But recently, what with so many more youma around these parts, it all gives me a bad feeling.”

The tone of Takki’s voice even made Youko feel uneasy. It seemed common sense to her that there were youma in the mountains and that they attacked people. What in the world had she gotten herself caught up in?

Seeing her caught up in her thoughts, Takki said in a cheerful voice, “Well, not much point to worrying ourselves sick when it won’t change a thing. So, Youko, do you have someplace to go after this?”

At the question, Youko raised her head. She looked at Takki and shook her head. “Other than looking for Keiki, there’s not much else I can do.”

Even if Keiki was a youma, she knew he couldn’t make things any worse for her than they already were.

“That’s going to take some time. Not a thing easily done.”

“Yes,” Youko reluctantly agreed.

“And in the meantime, you’ve got to make a living for yourself, no? Wouldn’t mind you staying here, but if my nosy neighbors find you out, they’d no doubt pack you off to the county seat. I could say you were the child of a relative, but they’d probably see through it before long.”

“I don’t want to cause you any more trouble.”

“East of here, there’s a town called Kasai (河西). My mother lives there.”

When Youko looked at her, Takki laughed. “She runs a hotel. Don’t worry, she won’t turn you in. She’s my mum, see. I’m sure she’ll give you a job. You willing to work?”

“Yes,” Youko agreed on the spot. It’d be tough looking for Keiki. And it’d be well-nigh impossible if she’d didn’t have a place to live in the meantime. Fighting the youma every night, having nothing to eat, sleeping outdoors—if she could avoid all that, she would.

Takki laughed and nodded. “That’s great. You’ll see, it won’t be such a bad job. Everybody who works there are good people. You’ll fit in just fine. How about we set off tomorrow?”

“That’d be okay.”

“Okay it is, then. We’d better get to bed. And tomorrow morning, if you’re not in the mood for traveling, we can stay here for another day if you want.”

Youko bowed her head deeply in gratitude.

Chapter 19

3-3 Her bed felt like a thin mattress laid out on a *tatami* mat. Youko fell asleep once, then woke up later in the middle of the night.

Her benefactor was sleeping soundly on the other side of the room. Youko sat up and clasped her knees, her clean nightshirt rustling against her clean skin. The shutters were closed. The room was dark. The night was quiet. Sheltered by the heavy roof and thick walls, not even sounds of small animals disturbed their rest. The air lay calm and still around them. The room felt like a place of sleep.

Youko got out of bed. She retrieved the sword from where it was stashed on the shelf, and went into the kitchen. She had quickly formed the habit of waking herself from a sound sleep, and until she felt the hilt of the sword in her grasp again, she could not rest easy. She sat down in a chair, wrapped her arms around the sword—now covered in a new cloth Takki had given her—and took a deep breath.

Takki had said it was a three-day trip to Kasai, where her mother ran the hotel. When they got there, Youko would have a home of her own in this world. She had no experience working for a living, but her sense of expectation was greater than her anxieties. She wondered what kind of people she would be working with.

She’d sleep in a real building, wake up in the morning, work all day, go to bed at night. Once she started working, she probably wouldn’t time to think about anything else. Maybe she wouldn’t be able to go home, to her home in that other world, or be able to look for Keiki. But right now, she couldn’t care less.

Having finally found herself a place in this world, she let herself drift off into sleep. As her forehead rested against the shrouded sword, a high, clear note sounded from within the steel.

Youko awoke with a start. A faint light was shining out from under the layer of cloth. She timidly undid the cloth. As on the night before, the sword was glimmering with a ghostly light. She could see small, dim images flickering across the blade.

Her eyes focused in the dark. The images drew into shape. Before her eyes, like a movie projection, was an image of her room. It looked so real she imagined that if she stretched out her hand, she could touch it. But it wasn’t real.

The cavernous echo of falling water continued incessantly. The figure she saw in the sword was, as before, her mother. Her mother moved aimlessly around Youko’s room.

She opened a drawer, moved things around on the shelf as if she were looking for something. About the umpteenth time, she opened the bureau drawers, the door opened and there was her father.

He said, and Youko heard his voice clearly. “The bath ready?”

Her mother shot him a quick glance and then resumed searching through the drawer. “Should be. If it’s warm enough, go ahead.”

“I need a change of clothes.”

“If that’s all you need, then get it yourself.”

There was a caustic edge to her mother’s voice. Her father’s reply was no less barbed. “Hanging around her room won’t do a damned bit of good.”

“I’m not just hanging around her room. I have things to do. If you need a change of clothes, you’re perfectly capable of getting it yourself.”

Her father said, his voice low, “Youko left. Spending your every waking moment camped out in her room isn’t going to bring her back!”

I left?

“She didn’t *leave*.”

“She ran away. She met up with that strange boy at school, didn’t she? Then they had some of their friends go outside and break the window. She got mixed up with a gang and hid it from us, isn’t that the best explanation for what happened?”

“She isn’t that kind of girl.”

“What you mean is, you never noticed. Like her hair. She’s been dying it all along, hasn’t she?”

“She didn’t.”

“It happens all the time. A kid starts hanging out with the wrong crowd, and finally she runs away from home. She’ll come home eventually, when the fun wears off.”

“She wouldn’t do something like that. That’s not the way I raised her.”

They both glared at each other. Her father said, “Every mother says that. That kid that broke into the school, they say his hair wasn’t a natural color, either. Those gang kids are all like that, and she was one of them, too.”

Dad, it’s not true! “Stop slandering your own daughter!” Her mother’s words boiled over with resentment. “What do you know? All you know is your work. But my work, everything to do with our child, I had to do!”

“That’s the way it is. That’s the father’s role.”

“Father? Who’s being a father?”

“Ritsuko. . . .”

“So you go to work, you bring a bunch of money home, and that makes you a father? Our daughter disappears and you didn’t even bother to take the day off! What kind of a father is that? Don’t lecture me about what Youko is or isn’t when you don’t know a thing about her!”

Her father seemed more surprised than angry, “Calm down, you’re being hysterical.”

“Oh, I am calm. I’m as calm as I possibly can be. Just imagining what Youko is going through, what do you expect me to do?”

“You have your responsibilities, too. You calm down, you do what you have to do, and then you can worry.”

“And doing your laundry is my responsibility, I suppose? Rather than worrying about my child, *that’s* what I should be concerning myself with? All you can think about is yourself!”

Her mother stared at her father. His face flushed with anger, but he said nothing.

“You say she was one of *them*? How can you say that? She’s a good, proper girl. She never talks back or acts up. She never gave me cause to worry, never. She could talk to me about anything. She’s not the kind of child who would run away from home. Because there wasn’t anything she’d want to run away from!”

Her father turned away, still holding his tongue.

“Youko left her backpack at school. And her coat too. How can that be called running away? Something must have happened. That’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“If it did, so what?”

Her mother’s eyes went wide. “So what?”

Her father answered bitterly. “Let’s say she did get caught up in something. Even so, what could you do about it? We informed the police about everything that happened. Running around like chickens with their heads cut off isn’t going to bring her home any faster.”

“Why do you have to say things like that!”

“Because it’s the truth! Handing out flyers and slapping posters on telephone poles, do you really think that’s going to make a difference? Be honest!”

“Stop it.”

“If she didn’t run away, if she got wrapped up in some kind of conspiracy or something, she’d be dead already.”

“Please stop!”

“You see it all the time on the news. Do those kids ever turn up alive? That’s why I say she ran away from home!”

Her mother burst into tears. Her father stared at her, then stomped out of the room.

Dad. . . Mom. . . .

Seeing them like this cut her to the core. The scene blurred. She closed her eyes and felt the tears tumble down her cheeks. When she opened her eyes, her vision was clear. The images had already vanished.

All she could see was the sword, the light gone out of it.

Chapter 20

3-4 She wept uncontrollably. “I didn’t die.”

Maybe she would be better off dead, but for the time being, she was still alive.

“I’m not a runaway.”

There must be some way to get back. She missed her home and her parents more than anything.

“That was the first time I ever saw Mom and Dad fight.”

Youko rested her forehead against the table. The tears came like rain.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid. . . .”

She didn’t know what it was she had seen, but it wasn’t necessarily the truth.

She sat up, wiped away the tears, and bound the sword in the cloth. Somehow, it was like the sword itself was showing her these visions. She couldn’t tell whether they were real or not. Her intuition, though, told her that the visions were true.

Stiffly, she got to her feet. She opened the back door and wandered out into the night. The heavens were suffused with stars. She didn't recognize any constellations. The fact was, she had never had any interest in astronomy, so it was probably because she didn't know any of the constellations up there.

She sat at the edge of the well. The cool stones and the cool breeze was a small comfort. She held her knees to her chest. Behind her, a saw-edged voice stabbed at her ears.

"No, no, no. You can't go home, missy."

She turned slowly. Sitting on sturdy stones that formed the rim of the well was the blue head of the monkey. The monkey rested there on the hewn surface, bodiless, as if severed at the neck, and laughed at her.

"My, my, my, but haven't you given up yet? You can't go home, little girl. You so want to, don't you? Go see your dear mum. But you can plead and plead and it will never happen."

Youko fumbled about for the sword, then realized that she'd left it in the house.

"It's what I keep telling you. You're perfectly capable of whacking off your own little head. And if you did, ah, you could rest so easy. All that love and all that longing, it will all go away."

"I'm not giving up. Someday I'll go home, even if it's the last thing I do."

The monkey cackled gaily. "So who am I to persuade you otherwise? But I might as well take the opportunity to fill you in on what's coming next."

Youko stood up. "I don't want to hear it."

"Really? You don't want to know? About that woman. . . ."

"Takki-san?" Youko turned.

The monkey bared its teeth at her. "You had better not trust her."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"She's not the good person you think she is, little girl. Good thing she didn't poison you during dinner and be done with it."

"Oh, give me a break."

"Maybe she's scheming to kill you and rob you of everything you've got. Or maybe she'll let you live and sell you into slavery. Either way, that's the kind of thing she's up to. And you want to thank her for it! Oh my, but you're so naïve!"

"Quit jerking me around."

"Don't I tell you these things out of love? Don't you understand? You've got no allies here, little girl. No one would shed a tear if you dropped dead. You're such a bother to everybody, don't you know?"

Youko stared hard at the monkey. The monkey answered her with a screech of laughter. "If I told you once, I told you a thousand times. If it's so painful, it can be all over in a moment." The monkey howled again, then turned on her with a fierce expression. "Since you won't say a bad word about her, let's just kill her, then."

"What. . .?"

"Kill her and take the money and run. Since you don't seem to know when to give up, you'd better do it for your own sake!"

"Shut up about it already!"

Chattering madly with laughter, the monkey disappeared, like chalk being erased off a blackboard. As before, only its grating laughter remained behind, fading away into the distance.

Youko continued to stare at the place the monkey no longer was. What did this thing have against her, to do nothing but give her such grief?

I don't believe it.

Not a single word the little monster had said.

The next morning, Youko was shaken awake. She opened her eyes. The large-framed woman was looking at her with a bothered expression. "You awake? Dead to the world, you were. Well, get yourself up and have some breakfast."

"Sorry."

Youko hurriedly got up. From the look on Takki's face, it was obvious she'd been sacked out for a long time.

"No need to apologize. How you doing? Ready to set off? We can always do it tomorrow."

"I'm okay," Youko said, bouncing to her feet. Takki laughed and pointed at her bed.

"There's a dress there. You know how to put one on?"

"Probably. . . I think."

"You run into trouble, give me a holler."

With that, Takki disappeared into the adjacent room. Youko sat down on the bed and picked up the kimono Takki had laid out for her.

It had an ankle-length skirt that was tied with a cord around the waist, a short, vest-like blouse along with a tunic the same length. It wasn't a comfortable fit when she first put it on. The collar pinched her neck as she walked into the next room, where Takki had set the table.

"Ah, looks just right on you." Takki put down a big bowl of soup and laughed. "It's a bit plain, true. Something from when I was younger would have been better."

"Not at all," Youko said. "Thank you very much."

"Even so, it's a bit too showy for me. I was thinking of giving it away to the neighbors one of these days. Well, let's eat. Don't hold back, now. We've got a long walk ahead of us."

"Okay."

Youko bowed. She sat down at the table. When she picked up the chopsticks, for a moment, she remembered what the monkey had said the night before. But it didn't feel true in the slightest.

She is a good person.

If the villagers knew that Takki had taken her in, they'd no doubt have harsh words for her. Takki had done good by her, and suspecting her now would only invite bad karma.

Chapter 21

3-5 It was past noon when they left Takki's house.

The trip to Kasai turned out to be an unexpectedly pleasant one. At first, Youko cowered whenever they encountered someone, but perhaps because Takki had dyed her hair with a dye made from herb roots, nobody cast a suspicious eye on her. She grew accustomed to it after a while and enjoyed meeting people along the way.

Although this country had the look and feel of old China, the people living here came in all different types. Their faces were generally Asian in appearance, but the color of their hair and eyes and skin was all over the place. Skin color varied from that of a white Caucasian to a black African. Eye color was everything from black to sea-blue. As for hair, there seemed to be an infinite variety, such as purple or blue-white. In some of the odder cases, hair was two-toned, as if part of it had been dyed.

Initially, it struck her all as very strange, but she got used to it fairly quickly. And once she did, she decided that, yes, different was good. And yet she didn't see anyone with pure, golden hair like Keiki.

Their clothing was in an old Chinese style. Men wore a tunic over short trousers. Women's fashions were based on the long skirt. Now and then, she spotted a group dressed in what was certainly an "Oriental" style, though from what country and what era, she couldn't tell. According to Takki, they were traveling minstrels.

For Youko, it was a relief just to walk. She followed Takki's lead, from getting food to arranging lodgings. Youko had no money, so Takki paid for everything.

"I'm really sorry I can't help out," she said as they walked along the road.

Takki laughed heartily. "I'm just an old busybody. You've got nothing to worry about."

"I've got nothing to give you in exchange."

"Not at all. It's been a long time since I've seen my mum. Thanks to you, now I've got a good excuse to go see her."

Her kind words were a joy to hear. "Takki-san, did you go to Gosou to get married?"

"No, that's where I got my *partition*."

"Partition?"

Takki nodded. "When you become an adult, you're given a plot of land and made to stand on your own two feet. The plot I received was in Gosou. That's what a partition is."

"Everybody receives land when they become an adult?"

"Yes, everybody. My husband is the old guy who lives next door. We split up after our child died."

Youko stared at Takki's jovial face. Now that she mentioned it, she had mentioned something about a child dying. Youko said, "I'm. . . sorry."

"Don't worry about it. I wasn't cut out to be a mother. The child we were blessed with after so long, she died on my account."

"Surely you don't mean. . ."

"Children come to us from heaven. So heaven taking her back again wasn't up to me. But people being what they are, I guess it was inevitable. It's too bad about the child, though."

Youko had no idea how to answer, but managed a hesitant smile. In a small way, Takki seemed a sad and lonely person.

“I imagine your mum must be worried sick about you. The faster you get home, the better, no?”

“Yes.” Youko nodded. “But is it really possible? When I was in Hairou, one of the town elders said it wasn’t.”

“Well, if you got here somehow, surely you can go back.”

Youko nodded again. The carefree smile that came to her lips reflected a profound happiness.

“Of course. Ah, here we are.”

At the fork of three roads, one pointed to the left. At every intersection along the road, there was always a small stone marker into which was carved distance and destination. Distance was measured in units called “*ri*” (里). This particular marker listed the destination as “*Sei*” (成) and the distance as “5 *ri*.”

According to what she remembered from her Japanese history textbook, a Japanese “*ri*” was two and a half miles. The “*ri*” referred to here was a much shorter distance, only several hundred yards. So five *ri* was not that far.

The scenery itself was prosaic, but the peace and quiet was quite nice. The mountains loomed craggy and tall above the rolling terrain. She could see faintly in the distance, mountains whose peaks were wrapped with clouds, but none covered with snow. The sky pressed low against the ground.

It seemed that here, spring had arrived a month earlier than in Tokyo. Flowers were blooming here and there along the rice paddy dikes. Youko recognized some, others were new to her.

Here and there, amidst the fields, several small houses were huddled together. These were villages, Takki told her, for the people who worked the land. A little further along, they came to a somewhat larger settlement enclosed by a tall wall. This was a town. It was where people in the surrounding areas lived during the winter.

“So where people live is different during the winter than in the other seasons?”

“There are a few oddballs that live in the villages during the winters, but the rest of us have better things to do than camp out in the fields. It’s much more comfortable in the towns. And safer.”

“Those walls sure are thick. It’s to protect you from the youma, right?”

“Youma wouldn’t attack a town like that. It’s mostly to protect from wars and wild animals.”

“Wild animals?”

“Wolves and bears. A panther or tiger will turn up now and then, though you don’t find them much around these parts. In the winter when game is hard to find, they come down to where people are.”

“How do people arrange housing during the winter? Do they rent?”

“You’re also given a house when you become an adult. Most people sell right away, though some rent to the townsfolk when they go back to the village. The ones that sell out rent during the winter. That’s the most common.”

“Oh.”

The cities were all guarded by high castle ramparts. There was only one way in and out of the city, through a reinforced gate. Guards were posted at the gate, and they inspected every person who entered or left.

Usually, the guards just guarded the gate, Takki said. They were particularly interested in any red-haired young women amongst the travelers, no doubt on the lookout for a kaikyaku who had run away from Hairou.

Inside the gate, the houses were packed together. Shops lined the crisscrossing avenues. The streets were busy with vagrants. A number of people had set up house tents along the base of the inner walls.

“If everybody receives their own land, why do they have to live in tents?”

When Youko pointed at the tents, Takki raised her eyebrows. “Those are refugees from the Kingdom of Kei. They are a sorry lot. There’s a great unrest in Kei these days. The refugees running away from youma and wars collect together like that. When it gets warmer, their numbers will increase.”

“It looks like there’s unrest here, too.”

“Indeed. It’s not only Kei. To the north, I hear there’s trouble in the Kingdom of Tai (戴). They say it’s even worse there.”

Youko only nodded. Japan was a peaceful country in comparison. Here, there were wars, and nothing good could be said about the state of law and order. They didn’t let their belongings out of their sight for a second. Unsavory characters propositioned her any number of times, and a tough-looking gang tried to draw her away. But Takki let loose a lively stream of invective and rescued her.

The lack of security was probably why nobody traveled at night. The city gate was shut as well. By the time the sun set, it was imperative that a traveler make it to the next town or city.

“You said it takes about four months to travel from one kingdom to another?”

“That’s right.”

“Is there any other way to travel than walking?”

“There’s horse and cart as well. But you got to be rich. Someone like me wouldn’t be able to afford it, not in a whole lifetime.”

It was an impoverished world compared to her own. No cars, no gas or electricity. Not even running water. This could not simply be due to the delayed development of civilization. She gathered from their conversations that the bigger source of the problem was a lack of any oil or coal technology.

She asked Takki, “So how did you learn so much about the other kingdoms? Have you been to Kei or Tai?”

“Of course not,” Takki laughed. “I’ve never been out of Kou. We peasants don’t do much in the way of traveling like that. Got to take care of the fields. You find out about the other kingdoms from listening to what the minstrels have to say.”

“Traveling actors and musicians, you mean?”

“Yes. There are those among them that have traveled around the world. In their performances, they tell stories about how they went here and saw this and how they went there and saw that. Tales from all the cities and all the kingdoms.”

“Wow,” Youko said. In her world, back in the olden days, people used to watch newsreels at the theater. It must be like that, she thought.

No matter what, it was great having someone with you to answer all your questions. Youko didn’t know a thing about this world, and the anxiety that came with not knowing was frightening. But with a helpful person at her side, someone who could explain things one by one as they came along, it was all quite fascinating.

With Takki at her side, they completed the trip without incident. A world that had struck as harsh and cruel had become a thing of great curiosity and interest.

Every night, she was visited by the strange visions, that made her homesick and left her feeling depressed. The blue monkey showed up too, and made things worse. But the raw feelings didn't last.

Once they got up the next morning and started out, it was one fascinating scene after another. Takki was as nice to her as she could have hoped for. Borrowing strength from the jewels, she could keep on walking without getting tired. And knowing that at night they would be eating a good meal and sleeping in a decent bed made it all the more tolerable.

It was hard being so far from her home, but at least she now had a caring guardian at her side. She couldn't be thankful enough that she had been lucky enough to meet her.

Chapter 22

3-6 The three-day journey was soon over, and proved somewhat anticlimactic. On the third day, the tall buildings of Kasai rising above the river plain told them that they had arrived. It was the first place Youko had seen that actually looked like a city.

"Well. . . it is big," Youko said, as they passed through the gate and got a chance to look around.

Takki chuckled. "Around these parts, the only city bigger than Kasai is Takkyuu (拓丘), the district capital."

A district was the next step up from a prefecture. Youko didn't have a good grasp of the relative sizes involved. She didn't think that Takki did either. When she spoke of the "government," it was sufficient for her to mean the town hall or maybe the prefecture seat.

Inside the gate, stores large and small lined the main road. They were different from those in the towns they'd passed through up to now. These were grand and luxurious. It reminded Youko of Chinatown. The big buildings had glass windows that were quite impressive. It was still early in the afternoon and the street was not crowded, but she had the feeling that come closing time and the place would be packed with travelers.

Now that she thought about her decision to live in this bustling city, her mood improved a bit. No matter where she settled down, even in one of the towns, she couldn't complain. But it went without saying that a lively place like this was better.

Takki turned off the main road and towards a block of smaller-scale shops. The area had a vaguely run-down feeling, but there was no change in the hustle-bustle atmosphere. A number of businesses were organized into a kind of medieval strip mall sharing a common roof. Takki headed towards the one that was quite the most elegant.

It was a three-story building with bright green pillars. They entered the imposing front doors into a large restaurant that took up the whole of the first floor. Takki left Youko to admire the splendid accouterments and grabbed the waiter who came out to greet them.

"Call the mistress for me, will you? Say her daughter's come to see her. You got that?"

The man's face broke into a grin and he hurried out of sight. Takki watched him leave, then sat Youko down at the nearest table. "You wait here. Go ahead and order something. Everything's really good."

"Are you sure it's okay?" This restaurant was bigger than any inn or dining hall they'd been in so far.

"Don't worry about it. My mum will pick up the tab. Treat yourself, anything you want."

Even so, Youko couldn't really follow the menu. Sensing that, Takki laughed, summoned a waiter and ordered a few things. The waiter bowed and left. At the same time, from the back of the restaurant appeared a woman just old enough to be called an "old woman."

"Mother," said Takki, standing up and smiling. The old woman reacted with a cheerful expression. Watching attentively, Youko saw with relief that she came across as a nice person. With her as her boss, it couldn't be that bad of a job.

"Youko, you wait here, okay? I have a few things to talk over with my mum."

"Yes," Youko said with a nod. Takki smiled and hurried after her mother. The two patted each other on the back and laughed together, and then disappeared into the back. Youko watched them leave with a smile. She placed Takki's rucksack next to the table and paused to look around the restaurant.

For some reason, there seemed to be no female employees. All the waiters and busboys were men, as were most of the customers. She caught several of them glancing in her direction, checking her out. Without really knowing why, she began to feel very unsettled.

A short time later, a group of four men came in. They sat themselves down at an adjacent table, turned and leered at her, whispered amongst themselves and burst into laughter. It was starting to creep her out.

As she scanned the restaurant, she saw no hint of Takki returning. She put up with it the best she could, but then one of the four got up and walked towards her. She scrambled to her feet, ignored the man calling after her and caught the attention of a waiter. "Um. . . do you know where I can find Takki-san?"

He curtly pointed towards the back of the restaurant. Figuring he meant for her to go find Takki by herself, Youko set off in the direction he had indicated, lugging the rucksack along with her. Nobody tried to stop her.

She made her way along a narrow corridor, and emerged into what looked like the building's cluttered back rooms. Feeling somehow self-conscious as she crept along, she at last came upon a beautifully carved door. The door was open. From behind a screen that blocked the middle of the room from view came Takki's voice.

"Really, there's nothing to worry about!"

"But, my dear, she's being sought by the police!"

Youko stopped in her tracks. There was reluctance in the old woman's voice. The sudden rush of anxiety made Youko stop and crane her neck. Of course, no way she'd want to hire a *kaikyaku*. She resisted the impulse to rush in and bow her head and beg, *Please*. That would be too presumptuous. At the same time, she was in too desperate a state of mind to return to the restaurant.

"Oh, what's a *kaikyaku*? Just somebody who got lost, no? All that stuff about them making bad things happen, you don't believe those old superstitions, do you?"

“Of course I don’t, but what if the officials find out?”

“Nobody says anything, nobody finds out anything. That girl’s not going to talk. Think about it, she’s a bargain find, don’t you think? Not bad looking, not too old. She’d be handy to have around.”

“Yes, but. . . .”

“Behaves herself, too. You teach her how to treat the guests right and she’ll be bringing ‘em in the front door. All you have to do is take her off my hands for a reasonable price. What’s there to worry about?”

Youko tilted her head to one side. Takki’s tone of voice was. . . odd. It wasn’t good manners to eavesdrop, but she wasn’t going to stop listening now. She began to hear something else as well, almost subconsciously, a sound like the faint roar of the ocean.

“But a *kaikyaku*. . . .”

“And no strings attached! Think of that. No parents or brothers storming in and raising a ruckus. Right from the start, it’ll be like she doesn’t even exist. None of the usual fuss and bother.”

“But does she really have what it takes to work here?”

“She said so herself. I told her it was a hotel. She thought I meant working as a maid or something. That girl is quite the little fool.”

Listening attentively to their conversation, Youko knew something was terribly wrong. She was “that girl.” Till now, Takki had always addressed her so warmly and sincerely. Youko didn’t sense a speck of that consideration now. What was she to make of this? It was almost as if she were listening to the voice of a completely different person.

“But. . . .”

“Everybody knows what those green pillars mean, and what kind of a woman works at a place that has them. You’d better know the difference, too, when it comes to paying the bill.”

Youko’s eyes flew open wide. The shock didn’t knock her flat only because she was still holding onto Takki’s rucksack. The monkey had told her. Why hadn’t she listened more closely to its warnings?

Shock, and then anger. Her pulse raced. Her constricted breath was hot in her throat. The sound of the ocean roared in her ears, deafening her. *So that’s what this has been about.* She took a tight grip of the sword, which was still wrapped like a parcel. A moment later, she settled herself down and instead, turned on her heels and retreated down the narrow hallway the way she had come. Pretending that nothing at all was amiss, she strode through the restaurant and headed for the exit.

At a brisk pace, Youko stepped through the doors and again looked up at the building. The pillars and beams, even the window frames, were painted green. She’d figured out what it meant in the nick of time. She was still carrying Takki’s rucksack. No way was she going back inside to return it.

Almost as if on cue, a second-floor window opened. A woman leaned against the ornate balcony railing and stared out at the world. Her gleaming kimono was rumpled and undone, the collar wide and open. Her occupation was as plain as the nose on her face.

Youko shuddered with revulsion. As if sensing that she was being watched, the woman looked down at her, laughed derisively, and closed the window.

Chapter 23

3-7 “Hey, miss.”

At the sound of the voice behind her, Youko tore her gaze away from the second floor balcony. Standing not far from her were the four men from before. One of them said to her, “You work there?”

“Not hardly,” she spat back.

She turned to leave. The man grabbed her arm and sidled in front of her, blocking her way. “Like hell you don’t. What kind woman eats at a place like that?”

“The person I was with knows someone there.”

“And what was *that* person up to, eh? Maybe she came here to sell you?”

The man grasped her chin with his hand. Youko swatted it away. “Not a chance. Get your hands off me.”

The man laughed. “Now, she’s a spunky one.” He yanked her closer. “C’mon, missy, let me buy you a drink.”

“Drop dead. Let go of me.”

“Tell the truth, she was selling you off, right? And now you’re wanting me to overlook how you’re trying to run out on the deal, eh?”

“I would never—” and with all her strength, Youko jerked her arm free of the man’s grip. “I would never work at a place like that. And I’m not for sale.”

She strode away from him, looking for a way out. The man grabbed her again, this time by the shoulders. She ducked and slipped free. Before he could come at her again, her hand was on the hilt of the sword.

Humans hold the sea inside them. And right now, the waves were surging violently, threatening to break out of her body and pound down upon the man there in front of her.

“I said, hands off.”

Her arm flashed and the cloth unraveled from the sword. The man retreated, goggle-eyed. “Son of a bitch. . . .”

“If you don’t want to get hurt, then get out of my way.”

The man sized up Youko and the sword. He chortled, “You even know how to use that thing?”

Wordlessly, Youko raised the sword, aligning the tip with the man’s throat. This was a dangerous weapon she’d been given, this claw of hers, this talon. “Move it. Go back to the restaurant. Your friends are waiting for you.”

Nearby, somebody shouted. Youko did not avert her gaze. Raising a sword in the middle of the street like this would no doubt cause a disturbance, but now was not the time to second-guess herself. The man’s eyes flicked back and forth between Youko and the tip of the sword. Slowly, he retreated. Just as he seemed ready to turn and run back into the restaurant, a scream reverberated across the street.

“That girl! Somebody grab that girl!”

Youko looked in the direction of the voice. Takki was standing in the door of the restaurant, yelling at her. An awful anger engulfed her, an awful thing like what she had seen in her dreams, like a blood-red tide engulfing the sea.

“She’s running away. Get her!”

The disgust that Youko felt welling up inside her almost made her sick. It was directed as much at herself as it was at that woman, who had deceived her with a beatific smile on her face.

People were flooding out of the restaurant and gathering in from the adjacent streets. Youko didn't let down her guard. She flipped the hilt of the sword over in her hand, brandishing the wide blade. Whether or not anybody ended up dead, that was up to Jouyuu. And if it went as far as somebody trying to arrest her again, well, there was a small part of her that wouldn't be too averse to a bit of killing, either.

Nobody will have you as an ally in this world.

She thought Takki was going to help her. She was so thankful to her. Over and over, she had thanked her lucky stars. She'd really believed, that's what made it so sickening.

She made note of the men rushing towards her. Jouyuu's tendrils crawled through the arms and down her legs. Her body moved with an extraordinarily natural grace. Every obstruction before her, she shut out of her mind.

"Get her! Get her! She cost me a fortune!"

At the sound of Takki's hysterical voice, Youko glanced back over her shoulder. For a moment, the deceived and the deceiver locked eyes. With a frightened expression, Takki retreated two, three steps. Youko stared her down with cold eyes, steeled herself against the rush of men. She dodged the first and second, smacked the third with the blade.

Almost before she knew it, the men had gathered in a human wall around her. Youko clucked softly to herself. Cutting her way through without killing anybody wasn't going to be easy.

Takki stamped her feet on the ground. "Catch her and there's a reward in it for you!"

From the back of the crowd came a scream. The crowd turned as one, and in that same instant, the grating, noisy shrieks were that much closer.

"What's going on?"

"She'll get away."

"No, over there."

The human wall swayed to and fro. Youko surveyed the street beyond them. A wave of people bore down on them. The people cried out as they ran *away* from something, scrambling frantically not to be left behind.

Youma.

Youko's arm responded in a flash.

"A youma. . . ."

"A *bafuku*!"

"Get out of here!"

The human wall crumbled and scattered. Within it, Youko set off at a run. From behind her echoed a scream. She saw a beast mowing down everyone in front of it as it galloped along. It was a huge tiger. The tiger had a human face stained with splotches of red. Youko ran down the street, dancing out of the way of people diving for cover in the surrounding shops and stores.

The tiger quickly closed the distance between them. She had no choice but to stop and make her stand.

She faced the tiger's disconcertingly human expression, re-gripped the hilt of the sword, and settled into her stance. The tiger charged at her in a gust of wind. She pivoted to the side and brought the sword down with all her might. A spray of blood accompanied the sound of impact, and she knew she could have avoided the blood if she hadn't closed her eyes in the moment that the blow landed.

She slashed at the striped limbs, skipping out of the way as it toppled over, and took off at a run. The beast roused itself, chased after her. She parried with the sword, fainted with her feet, raced down an alleyway.

She emerged into the main thoroughfare and found there a crowd of people who hadn't grasped exactly what was going on. "Get out of the way!"

At the sound of Youko's voice and the sight of the beast chasing after her, the crowd scattered.

And then. . . .

"What?"

There, in the distance, a flash of gold. It was beyond the crowd, too far away to make out any facial features. She didn't have the time to take a good, long look, but she knew that kind of golden hair was out of the ordinary.

"Keiki!"

Without thinking, she set off after him. In the next moment, the golden glow was swallowed up in the stampede of human beings.

"Keiki?"

A shadow fell suddenly across the sun. The huge tiger sailed over Youko's head. The youma landed amongst the fleeing throng. People screamed, trampled beneath the huge paws. Youko checked her forward motion and ducked out of the way.

Keiki? Who else could it have been?

She didn't have time to think about it. She slammed another blow into the pursuing beast. Then, taking advantage of the confusion all around her, slipped away through the streets of Kasai.

Chapter 24

3-8 The monkey said, "I told you so."

It was the middle of the night. The monkey's head floated above the stone marker standing at the side of the road. After leaving Kasai and wandering about for a while, Youko had continued on down the highway.

She was on her own again. In the process, she'd ended up with Takki's rucksack. In the bag was a change of clothes and Takki's purse. There was enough money in her purse that if she ate and slept in cheap dives along the way, she could make it last a bit. The theft didn't bother her conscience a bit.

"I warned you, silly girl."

Youko ignored him. The glowing blue head tagged along, as if skating next to her as she walked along silently. Youko zoned out the monkey and its screeching laughter. She knew she'd been a fool to let herself be fooled so badly. She didn't need to hear it from the monkey as well.

Besides, she had more pressing things on her mind than the monkey, such as the gold-haired man she'd seen in Kasai, and the appearance of the youma in the middle of the city.

Youma are never supposed to go where people live.

Takki had said as much, said that it was rare that such a thing should happen.

Youma never show up in the middle of the day.

The tiger in Kasai, the dog-like creatures that attacked the wagon, the kochou that had shown up at her school, they had shown up during the day or in the early evening. But they were the exceptions.

Was it because Keiki was there?

The monkey's piercing laughter interrupted her mid-thought. "Little girl, it's because you're such an easy mark!"

This was impossible for her to ignore. "It's not!"

"Oh, but it is. Think about it carefully, little girl. Even you find it most strange, do you not?"

Youko bit her lip. She was determined to believe in Keiki. If she couldn't believe in him, she would have nothing to fall back on. Nevertheless, her doubts continued to grow.

"He pulled the wool over your eyes, little girl. He gave you the shaft, he did."

"No, he didn't."

"I simply cannot comprehend this stubbornness of yours." The monkey said, laughing, "Unless it's your way of refusing to see what a fine fix you really are in."

"Keiki protected me from the kochou. Keiki is my friend."

"Really? Is he? And since coming here, exactly how has he helped you? It was that one time only, no?"

Youko stared long and hard at the monkey. How could it know about what had happened before she came to this world? The tone of his voice gave her the creeps.

"What do you mean, that one time?"

"Over yonder, I mean. When you were attacked by the kochou, I mean."

"How could you know anything about what happened there?"

The monkey screeched, "Oh, I know *everything* about you, little girl. I know how much you distrusted Keiki. How hard you tried to get away from him. You don't want to believe it, how much he totally used you."

Youko averted her gaze and stared at the dark road. "That's not. . . it's not true."

"Then why hasn't he come to help you?"

"Something must have happened."

"What possibly could have happened? Did he not say he was going to protect you, little girl? Let us think this thing through. It was a trap, right? Do you get it now?"

"Other than at the school, I can't be sure that I really saw him those other two times. It couldn't have been him!"

"Have you been seeing a lot of golden-haired chaps around these parts?"

I don't want to listen to this.

"And wasn't your Jouyuu convinced it was Keiki as well?"

How could he know about Jouyuu? As she thought about this, staring off into the distance, the monkey's mocking eyes suddenly collided with hers.

"I know *everything*. Just like I told you."

Taiho. That voice was suddenly alive in her memory. She shook her head. She would never forget the surprise contained in that one word

“No. That’s not right. Keiki is not my enemy.”

“Are you certain? Really certain? Yes, but that would be nice.”

“Shut up!”

The monkey turned its eyes towards the heavens, laughed. He whispered, “Want to know what I think?”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“It was Keiki who sent those youma to attack you.”

Youko couldn’t move. The monkey looked at her blank, wide-eyed stare and leered at her.

She said, “No way.”

The monkey roared with mirth, peals of laughter that went on and on like the ravings of a madman.

“There’s no way!”

“Are you so sure about that?”

“He’d have no reason to do anything like that!”

“No reason?” the monkey inquired, with a crooked smile.

“Why would Keiki do something like that? It was Keiki who saved me from the kochou, wasn’t it? He gave me this sword, and put Jouyuu inside me. It’s only thanks to him that I’m still alive.”

The monkey giggled gleefully.

“If he wanted to kill me, he could have done it right then and there.”

“He had you attacked on purpose, so he could save you and be your pal. Did you ever think of that?”

Youko bit her lip. “Yes, but now that I’ve got Jouyuu, it won’t be so easy. If he wanted to kill me now, he’d have to exorcize Jouyuu out of me first.”

“But maybe his goal isn’t to kill you.”

“Then what?”

“Hmm, I wonder. Well, you’d better figure it out eventually. They are really going to come after you after this.”

Youko scowled at the bobbing, chortling head and quickened her pace. “You can’t go home.” The monkey’s voice followed after her. “Not at all, little girl. You’re going to die here, my dear.”

“No way.”

“But there’s always a way, isn’t there? *If it hurts so much, it could all be over in an instant.*”

“Shut up!” Youko shouted.

Her words were swallowed up in the darkness.

Part IV

Chapter 25



ouko continued on her aimless trek for two more days, with only the blue monkey as her companion. She had no other goal but to get as far away from Hairou and Kasai as possible.

At every city, the gates were closely watched by the guards and travelers were carefully inspected. Perhaps it had gotten out that a runaway kaikyaku from Hairou had shown up in Kasai. At the smaller towns, the small number of people coming and going meant that it was impossible to mingle in with the crowds and get past the guards.

She had no choice but to keep to the highway and camp in the fields at night. On the third day, she arrived at a city even larger than Kasai, surrounded by a high, fortified wall studded with parapets. “Takkyuu Castle,” it said above the gate. This, then, was the district capital.

Shops lined the thoroughfare all the way up to the gates of the city. At other cities, the fields and farms spread out from the shadow of the walls. Here at Takkyuu, peddlers had set up a market outside the city walls and the fields were covered with tents. Buyers and sellers jammed the roads that encircled the city.

Inside the crude tents, there was something for everybody. Pushing her way through the throngs in front of the gate, Youko spied a tent with piles of clothing stacked up inside. It occurred to her that it might be a good idea to buy some used boy’s clothes. Traveling alone as a young woman was only inviting trouble. With Jouyuu’s help, it was easy enough to get out of trouble, but better not to get caught up in it in the first place.

The outfit Youko purchased was made of a thick material that resembled canvas. It consisted of a sleeveless, knee-length tunic and a pair of short trousers. It was the kind of clothing she’d seen farmers wearing, as well as poor people and refugees from Kei, including women.

She snuck away for a moment and changed clothes out of view of the street. In only half a month, she’d completely shed all the roundness in her body, so much so that the fit of men’s clothing wasn’t half bad.

Youko had mixed emotions seeing her lean, fat-free body. Her arms and legs had gone through a hard, grueling workout. Her scrawniness only exaggerated the definition of her muscles. At home in her old world, she approached the bathroom scales with great trepidation. The diet she could never stay on, she had now taken to with a vengeance. It was really quite funny.

She suddenly thought of blue, a deep navy blue, a bright kind of indigo. The color of jeans. She’d always wanted a pair of jeans.

When she was in elementary school, there was an athletic field day she got to participate in. The boys and girls were split into two teams and competed against each other. Because you couldn't really move around in a dress, she talked her mother into buying her some jeans. But when her father saw them, he was livid.

Your father doesn't think girls should wear clothing like that.

"But everybody wears them!"

Your father doesn't like it. He thinks it's indecent for girls to dress up like boys, and talk like boys. He won't stand for it.

"But there'll be races. I'll lose if I have to wear a skirt!"

Losing to boys is nothing to be ashamed of.

"But . . ."

When Youko wanted to argue further, her mother took the upper hand. She bowed deeply. *I'm sorry, Youko, but you have to apologize to your father.*

So she did, and the jeans were returned to the store.

"This stinks."

Have patience, Youko.

"But why did I have to apologize to father? I didn't do anything wrong!"

You'll understand when you get married. It's best this way. . . .

Remembering it now, Youko burst out laughing. If her father could see her now, to see the look on his face! Wearing boy's clothing, carrying a sword, camping out in the fields when an inn wasn't available. She could just imagine his face red with apoplectic rage.

That's the kind of person he is, my father. A girl should be charming and chaste. That's what mattered most. And humble and reserved and obedient to a fault. A girl didn't need to be smart or strong. She'd believed it too, for a long time.

She said aloud, "But it's not true!"

What good did it do her, getting meekly and humbly arrested? Or meekly and humbly letting Takki sell her to a brothel?

Youko gripped her shrouded sword. If there was one thing she wished she had done differently, it was that when she first met Keiki, she had possessed a bit more backbone. At the bare minimum, at least ask what this was all about. Where were they going? In what direction, to what destination, and when were they coming back? If she'd done that, she doubted she'd be in the fix she was in now, up the creek and without a clue.

Being weak was no way to stay safe. If she didn't push her brain and her body to the limit, she wasn't going to survive.

Survive.

She was going to survive, she was going home. Those were the only desires she would permit herself.

The outfit she had been wearing, she sold to a used clothes dealer, along with Takki's things, taking a little money in exchange. Money in hand, she mingled in with the crowds moving through the gate. None of the guards flagged her down. Once inside, she headed towards the heart of the city. She learned from Takki that inns got cheaper the farther away from the gate you got.

"What'll it be, boy?" she was asked when she walked into the inn. Youko had to smile to herself. Most inns ran a dining hall on the side. It was typical to get asked for an order right off the bat.

Youko glanced around the premises. You could tell a lot about a place from the atmosphere of the dining hall. This inn was no high class establishment, but it wasn't skid row, either.

"Are there any vacancies?" she asked.

The innkeeper gave Youko an inquisitive look. "You by yourself?"

When Youko nodded, the innkeeper said, "Hundred *sen* (錢). You got money, I assume?"

Youko answered by showing the purse. It was common practice to pay when you checked out.

The currency of the realm was coin. There were several kinds of square and round coins. The square coins had the higher value. Money was counted in "sen," and the value was engraved on the face of the coin. There also seemed to be gold and silver coins, but she hadn't seen paper money.

"You need anything?"

Youko shook her head. The only thing that came free with the room was access to the well. Everything else—use of the bath, food and drink—was a la carte. She'd figured this out on her travels with Takki, and so had already gotten something to eat at a food cart outside the gate.

The innkeeper nodded curtly and called out to the back room, "Hey, we've got a guest. Show him up to his room."

An old man promptly emerged from the back room and bowed in response. A smile frozen on his face, with his gaze, he directed Youko towards the interior of the inn. Relieved to have so easily gotten herself a room, she followed after him.

Chapter 26

4-2 They climbed the stairs at the back of the inn to the fourth floor. These buildings were all made out of wood, and in big cities, usually topped out at three floors. This inn apparently had a fourth. The ceiling was low enough that Youko could easily reach up and touch it. A big woman like Takki would have to stoop over.

She was shown a small room, not much more than six by six feet, with a wooden floor. A set of high shelves lined the wall at the back of the room, piled with some faded *futons*. There was no bed. You slept on a futon on the floor.

Next to the wall, the shelves forced you to bend over, even kneel down. You could stand up in the front half of the room. The back half of the room was for sleeping. The rooms she'd stayed in with Takki had high ceilings and beds and even a table. For the two of them, it cost something like five-hundred *sen* a night.

Because this wasn't the safest part of town, in this kind of inn, you locked your door coming in and going out. The old man handed Youko the key and started to leave. Youko stopped him and said, "Excuse me, but where can I find the well?"

When she spoke, the old man jerked around like a dog running past the end of his leash. His eyes grew wide. For several long moments, he stared at her.

"Um. . ." said Youko. Thinking he hadn't heard her correctly, she repeated the question. The old man's eyes grew wider.

“Japanese. . .” he said, and all but ran back into her room. “You—you come from Japan?”

When Youko didn’t answer, he grabbed her by the arm. “You’re a kaikyaku? When did you get here? Where you from? Speak Japanese to me again.”

Youko could only stand there and look at him.

“Please, do like you was talking before. I haven’t heard Japanese spoken for years and years.”

“I, ah. . . .”

“I’m from Japan, too. Go ahead, let me hear you speak Japanese.”

From within his eyes, deeply set in his wrinkled face, tears welled up, sparkling and clear. Youko felt herself start to tear up as well. What a strange coincidence this was, that in this strange land, in a corner of this big city, the two of them should have met.

She said, “You’re a kaikyaku, then?”

The old man nodded. Over and over, impatiently, bobbing his head as if words would not come. He gripped Youko’s arm with gnarled fingers. She could see in the firmness of his hold on her, what kind of loneliness he had endured. She squeezed his hand in return

“Tea?” he asked in a tremulous voice. “You want some tea?”

Youko bowed her head.

“You drink tea, don’t you? Ain’t much, but I got me some green tea. You wait here while I go fetch it, okay?”

“Thank you.”

The old man returned a short time later with two teacups. Youko thanked him graciously. The sudden smell of green tea brought back memories of home. Closely observing Youko as she tasted the tea in her mouth, the man sat down on the floor in front of her.

“So happy to meet you, I told ‘em I was sick and skipped out on work. Tell me, boy. . . no, girl, ain’t you? What’s your name?”

“Youko Nakajima.”

Ah, the old man’s eyes replied. “I’m Seizou Matsuyama. Now, miss, my Japanese is not too strange for you, is it?”

Youko wanted to nod, but shook her head. He did have an accent, but she could understand him well enough.

“Well, then.” The old man really looked happy enough to cry. Indeed, he seemed to be laughing and crying at the same time. He asked, “Where was you born?”

“Where was I born? In Tokyo.”

Seizou gripped his teacup. “Tokyo? I can’t hardly believe that Tokyo is still standing.”

“Say what?”

He paid no mind to Youko’s response, wiped his cheeks with the sleeve of his tunic. “I was born in Kouchi, in Shikoku. I was living in [Kure](#) when I came here.”

“Kure?”

“Kure, in Hiroshima. You know Kure?”

Youko nodded, trying to recall her old geography lessons. “I think I remember hearing about it before.”

The old man laughed bitterly. “A naval base and arsenal was there. I worked in the harbor.”

“So you moved from Kouchi to Hiroshima?”

“My mom was staying at her parent’s place in Kure at the time. The house got burnt up in an air raid, third of July it was. So she sent me to live with my uncle. He said he wouldn’t feed me just for sittin’ around all day, so I got a job. That’s when we was attacked and the boat I was comin’ into harbor on got near sunk, I fell overboard in all the confusion.”

Youko realized that he was talking about the Second World War.

“And when I came to, I was in the Kyokai. I was drifting on the sea when I got rescued.”

The way the old man pronounced “Kyokai” was slightly different from what Youko was used to hearing, closer to “Kokai.”

“So. . . that’s how it happened.”

“There’d been real bad air raids before then too, even after the arsenal was reduced to rubble. There was ships at the naval base, but they couldn’t help. The Setonaikai and the Suou Sea being all full of mines, the ships couldn’t get through.”

“Oh,” said Youko.

“Tokyo was bombed in March, the whole place turned to ashes. Same thing happened to Osaka in June, a big air raid burned down the city. Luzón and Okinawa surrendered. Honestly, I didn’t think we was going to win. We lost, didn’t we?”

“Um. . . yes.”

The old man sighed deeply. “Figures. For a long time I had the feeling that’s the way things was headed.”

Youko didn’t really understand this feeling. Her parents were born after the war. None of her older relatives ever talked about those times. It was like ancient history to her, the kind of things you learned about in textbooks, or from movies or television.

Nevertheless, what he was talking about was not as distant to her as this world. Although she could not well picture in her mind what he was talking about, it was gratifying to hear such deeply familiar places and historical events spoken of again.

“So Tokyo’s still around. Well, I suppose that Japan belongs to the United States now.”

“Not hardly!” Youko exclaimed.

The old man’s eyes widened in turn. “Is that so. . . is that so. But, miss, what’s with those eyes of yours?”

After a moment of bewilderment, she realized that he was referring to her eyes. Her eyes had turned an emerald green since coming here. She hesitated then said, “This has got nothing to do with that.”

The old man bowed and shook his head. “No, no. Forget I said anything. It’s just that I was so sure about Japan being made into a colony of America. It ain’t being so, pay no mind, pay no mind.”



Here under distant, foreign skies, this old man continued to fret about his motherland, whose fate he could not ascertain for himself. What would become of their country neither he nor Youko could know. It was only with the passage of time that these sentiments had become so much deeper. It must have been hard enough being thrown into the maelstrom of this world. But on top of it all, this old man had for half a century continued to nurse these affections for his homeland.

He said, "And is His Majesty doing well?"

"You mean the Showa Emperor? If you mean the Showa Emperor, well, he survived the war okay, but he's. . ."

Dead, she was going to say. She corrected herself and phrased it more politely. "He unfortunately has passed away."

The old man's head jerked up, and then he bowed deeply, pressed his sleeves to his eyes. After a moment of hesitation, Youko patted his rounded shoulders. As he did not seem offended, she continued to stroke the man's almost skeletal back until his weeping had subsided.

Chapter 27

4-3 The old man said, "Sorry about that. When you get to be my age, you cry more easily."

Youko didn't say anything, only shook her head.

"So. . . what year was it?"

"What year?" Youko echoed.

The old man looked back at her with an inscrutable expression. He said, "When did the Great War end?"

"It was in 1945."

"Showa?"

"Um. . . ." Youko had to think about it for a minute, digging out of her memory the chronological tables she'd memorized for her high school exams. "Showa 20, I think."

"Showa 20?" He stared at her. "I came here in Showa 20. When in Showa 20?"

"August. . . it was August 15th."

The old man balled his hands into fists. "August? The 15th of August, Showa 20?"

"Yes. . . ."

"I was thrown overboard on July the 28th!" He glared at her. "Not more than half a month before!"

Not having the slightest idea of what to say, Youko could only bow her head, quietly, patiently, while the old man railed on, spelling out all the sacrifices he had suffered because of the war.

It was close to midnight when he finally got around to asking Youko about herself. Her family, her home, what kind of house she lived in, what kind of life she had led. Answering these questions was a bit painful. It struck her forcefully that here was a person, born well before her time, who had been transported to this place and had never returned.

Was this to be her fate as well? Was she to live her whole life in this strange country, never to go home? At least she'd had the good fortune of meeting a fellow *kaikyaku*. When she thought about all the time the old man has been by himself, it really was a stroke of good luck.

"So tell me, what did I do to deserve this?" The old man sat cross-legged with his elbows on his knees, head in his hands. "My friends and family all gone, me ending up in this strange place. I was expecting to die in one of them air raids, anyways, but to think it would've been all ended in but half a month, just half a month."

Youko still had nothing to say.

"The war ending, that would have turned everything around. But instead, I ended up here, not once ever being able to enjoy myself, not even have a decent meal."

"Yes, but. . . ."

"Lots of times I tell myself it'd be better if I'd died in one of them air raids, better than coming to this strange place where I got no sense of what or where anything is, and don't understand a thing nobody says at all."

Youko looked at him in surprise. "You don't understand what anybody says?"

"Not at all. Just a few words here and there. That's why this kind of job is all the work I can get." He gave Youko a suspicious look. "You get what they're saying?"

"Yes. . ." said Youko, said tentatively. "It sounds like Japanese to me."

"Nonsense," the old man said, an astonished look on his face. "The only Japanese I ever heard, save me talking to myself, was from you, starting today. I don't know what kind of words they're speaking, but I got the feeling it's something like Chinese. Ain't nothing like Japanese, that's for damn sure."

"But don't they write with kanji?"

"Yeah, they write it. But Chinese-type characters. There was some Chinamen working at the harbor and them's the kind of words they used."

"That can't be possible!" Youko looked at the old man, a tumult of emotions coursing through her. "I haven't had a single problem with the language since coming here, not one. If they were speaking something other than Japanese, there's no way I could understand them."

"Then you was understanding what they was saying downstairs earlier?"

"Of course."

The old man shook his head. "Whatever you think you been hearing, it ain't Japanese. Nobody here speaks Japanese."

What in the world was going on, Youko wondered, her confusion only deepening. There was no doubt in her mind that what she was hearing was Japanese. But the old man was telling her it wasn't Japanese. She could not discern any measurable difference what she'd been hearing all along and the language he was speaking.

She said, "This is the Kingdom of Kou. *Kou* (巧) is written with the kanji that means "skillful," right?"

"Yes."

"We're *kaikyaku*, and we came from across the *Kyokai*, which means the Sea of Emptiness."

"Right again."

"This city is the prefecture seat."

"Prefecture seat? It's a castle town. A fiefdom, you mean."

“No, like the prefectural offices in Japan.”

“Like a prefectural office?”

“Where the governor lives.”

“The governor, you say? No governor lives here. The head guy here is the magistrate.”

What’s he talking about, Youko muttered to herself. “I’ve always heard him called governor.”

“Ain’t no such person.”

“During the winter, people live in the towns, and when spring comes they return to the villages.”

“People live in villages. In the spring, they go to the hamlets.”

“Yes, but I . . .”

The old man stared fiercely at her. “Who the hell are you!”

“I’m . . .”

“You’re not a kaikyaku like me at all! I’ve been here by myself in this strange country forever! Abandoned here in the middle of a war, not knowing nothing about no language or customs, no wife, no kids, just me!”

Why was this happening? Youko desperately searched for an answer. No matter how she thought about it, there was no clue in anything she had heard up to now that explained it.

“Out of the frying pan, into the fire, that was me. We made all the sacrifices during the war and you got to live the easy life! Why is that?”

“I don’t know!” Youko shouted back.

A voice asked from the hallway outside the door, “Is there something wrong?”

The old man hurriedly put his finger up to his lips. Youko turned towards the door and said, “I’m sorry, it’s nothing.”

“There’s people here trying to sleep.”

“I’ll be more quiet after this.”

From the other side the door, the sound of footsteps trailed away. Youko sighed. The old man looked at Youko with an amazed expression on his face.

“You understood all that?”

The language they were speaking, he meant. Youko nodded. “I understood it.”

“You was speaking our language!”

“Whose language was I speaking?”

“You was speaking Japanese!”

“But, the man I was speaking to, he understood me.”

“So it seems.”

Youko had spoken the same language she always spoke, she had heard the same words she always heard. What could account for this strange phenomenon?

The old man’s expression softened somewhat. “Fact remains, you’re no kaikyaku. Not in the slightest. You not just some ordinary kaikyaku, that’s for sure.”

The way he said “kaikyaku,” it wasn’t just the intonation he used, now that Youko had become accustomed to his voice, the way he pronounced the words was a bit different as well.

“How is it that you can understand them words?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t know, huh?”

“Honestly, I haven’t got the slightest idea. I don’t know why I came here in the first place, or why we’re different from each other.”

And why had her appearance changed? As she asked herself this question she touched her dyed hair, now hard to the touch. She said, “How are we ever going to get back?”

“I been searching for the same thing. All they say is, can’t. That’s the only answer.”

He gave Youko a dispirited look. “If there was some way to go back, I would’ve done it a long time ago. Now, even if I did get back somehow, I’d be like old Rip Van Winkle. So. . . miss, where you are headed?”

“No place in particular. Can I ask you something?”

“What’s that?”

“Did you get arrested when you came here?”

“Arrested?”

Seizou gave her a wide-eyed look, and then a thoughtful expression. “That’s right. They arrest kaikyaku here. Nope, not me. I washed ashore in Kei.”

“What? What difference does that make?”

“It’s because different kingdoms treat kaikyaku different. I arrived in Kei, got my papers there. Lived there until last year. Then the king died and the whole place went to hell. Living there got to be impossible, so I got out, came here.”

Youko recalled the refugees she had seen in the city. “So. . . you can live in Kei without anybody arresting you?”

Seizou nodded. “True enough, but you can’t live there now. There’s a civil war going on, the whole place is a mess. The town I was living in got attacked by youma and half the people was killed.”

“Killed by youma? Not because of the war?”

“When a kingdom goes to hell in a handbasket, that’s when the youma show up. And not just youma. Droughts and floods and earthquakes, too. Nothing but bad things happen. So I left there in a hurry.”

Youko turned away. So you could live in Kei without people chasing after you all the time. Staying a fugitive in Kou or risking it in Kei, which would be the safer course? She was pondering this when Seizou interrupted her.

“The women, they left a long time ago. Who knows what the king was thinking, but all of ‘em were driven out of there.”

“You’re kidding.”

“It’s the truth. There was this rumor going around that if there was any women left in Gyouten (堯天)—that’s the capital city—they’d be killed. It wasn’t a good place to be anymore and most people I knew got out while the getting was good. You don’t want to be anywhere near it. It’s a hornet’s nest of youma. At one time, lots of people was trying to leave, but that’s died down recently. They been closing down the borders.”

“So that’s the way it is,” Youko muttered.

Seizou snorted derisively. “I don’t know a thing about Japan without asking, but I go on telling you about what goes on here. Looks like I’m becoming one of them, after all.”

“You surely don’t mean that.”



Seizou held up his hand. "Compared to Kei, Kou is a much better place. But, let on that you're kaikyaku and they slap you in irons. Better or no, not much you can do in either case."

"But I . . ."

Seizou laughed. When he laughed it almost sounded like he was weeping. "I know, I know. It's not your fault. I know, but it still stings. No need to take it out on you. You having to stay on the lam, that's got to be tough, too."

Youko only shook her head.

"I got to get back to my job. Breakfast to get ready. You take care, wherever you're going, okay?"

With that, he slipped out of the room and was gone.

Youko was about to call him back, but stopped herself. "Goodnight," was all she said.

Chapter 28

4-4 Youko pulled the futons down from the shelf. With a sigh, she resigned herself to making her bed there. It had been a long time since she'd slept on a futon and she was still wide awake. So many things weighed on her mind.

Why was it that the language didn't confuse her? If she hadn't been able to comprehend what people were saying, she couldn't begin to imagine how things might have turned out. She couldn't begin to imagine why things had turned out the way they had.

If the *lingua franca* spoken here wasn't Japanese, then there was no way she should be able to understand anything. When she spoke to that person outside the door, what possible language could she have been using? The old man heard Japanese and the other person heard the language they spoke here.

The few words that the old man could speak in the language sounded only slightly different to her ears. Even that was a curious thing. And then saying that there was no such word as "governor." If that was the case, then what had she been hearing every time someone said the word?

Youko stared up at the low ceiling. *A translation.* The words were somehow being translated so she could understand them.

"Jouyuu? Is this your doing?"

Of course, in response to her murmured words, she felt nothing at all.

As she always did, she slept with the sword clasped to her chest. When she awoke, the rucksack she had deposited in the corner of the room the night before had disappeared. Youko jumped to her feet and examined the door. The lock was fastened soundly.

She caught up with the manager and explained what had happened. The door and room were examined by two men who both regarded Youko with suspicious looks.

"Are you sure you really had your luggage here?"

"It was. My purse was inside it. Somebody stole it."

"Yeah, but the door was locked."

"What about a master key?"

The men again exchanged suspicious expressions. “You trying to say that one of us stole your stuff?”

“We couldn’t do it if we wanted to. Or were you intending to blame us and run out on the bill all along?”

The men sidled up to Youko. She put her hand on the hilt of the sword. “Not true.”

“At any rate, you still owe us.”

“I told you, my purse was stolen, too.”

“Let’s take it up with the cops, then.”

“Wait a minute.” Youko started to undo the covering of her sword. She said, “Call that old man who was here last night.” It occurred to her that he could put in a good word for her.

“Old man?”

“From Kei. His name is Matsuyama.”

The two men exchanged glances. “What do you want with him?”

“Ask him. He saw my rucksack.”

One of the men stood guard at the front door and gestured with his chin to his younger companion, who ran off down the hall. He said to Youko, “What’ve you got there in your left hand?”

“Nothing with any money in it.”

“Maybe that’s for me to decide.”

“After we talk to the old man.”

The man glared at Youko, taking her curt reply to mean she was hiding something. Soon came the sound of pounding footsteps and the young man returned.

“He’s not here.”

“Not here?”

“His stuff’s not here either. It looks like he took off.”

The man blocking the doorway stood there clucking his tongue. The sound made Youko’s blood boil. *It was him.* That old man did it. She closed her eyes. Despite them both being *kaikyaku*, he had betrayed her.

Maybe he couldn’t forgive the fact that she had grown up knowing only the good life after the war, or that she could understand the language while he couldn’t. Or rather, that robbing her had been his intent all along. She thought she had found herself a kindred spirit. He’d led her to believe that as well. After being tricked by Takki, she didn’t have the courage to trust any of these people, and now she’d let herself be fooled by a *kaikyaku* like herself.

Something painful rose up in her throat, anger that called up visions of storm-wracked seas. When that happened, she knew she was about to turn into some kind of monster. Buffeted by these waves, she spat out, “*He* stole it.”

The younger man said, “He was just a tramp. He got tired of working here.”

“Stop making excuses and hand that thing over. I’ll decide whether it’s worth anything or not.”

Youko grasped the sword. “I am the injured party here.”

“And we’ve got a business to run. We can’t be letting people stay here for free.”

“Then you should run your business better.”

“Shut up and hand it over.”

The two men closed in on her. Youko set herself into a defensive position, and with a flick of her wrist, unraveled the covering on the sword. A beam of sunlight spilling in through a small window glittered off the blade.

“What the hell. . . .”

“Get out of the way. I told you, I am the injured party here.”

The younger man yelped and ran off. The man left behind wavered back and forth, clearly flustered.

“Move it. If it’s money you want, chase after that old man.”

“This is what you had planned all along!”

“I already told you what happened. You catch the old man and the money in the rucksack is all yours.”

She thrust out the sword in front of her, the man retreated. She advanced three more steps, the man hurriedly turned and fled. Youko feigned as if giving chase, and then fled at a run.

Summoned by the other man, a posse of men came running, swords drawn. They poured out of the inn and pushed their way through the crowds. Youko noticed that her arm ached badly, the same place where the old man had tightly held her arm the night before.

She wasn’t going to trust anybody ever again, this she promised herself.

Chapter 29

4-5 After that, she went back to camping outdoors.

For no particular reason, she followed the road to the next town. Having no money, she couldn’t rent a room or buy a meal. She would have preferred to sleep next to the castle walls like the refugees, but the guards at the gate looked alert; and trying to mingle in with the crowds would be a pain. She gave up on the idea.

Nobody will be your ally. No one will help you. There’s not a person here who will let you get away with a damn thing.

Anyway, when she thought about being tricked and being betrayed, she told herself she’d rather sleep under the stars and chase the youma away with the sword.

After changing clothes, instead of being recognized as a teenaged girl, she was taken more often for a younger boy. There was not much law and order out here. She tangled with shady-looking types a number of times, but she had lost any reluctance at all when it came to using the sword to make a threatening point.

During the day, she walked while keeping a sharp eye on passers-by. During the night, she walked while fighting the youma. She couldn’t sleep at night without risking an attack, so she became a nocturnal animal, keeping on her toes at night and sleeping during the day.

There were families that sold food from huts along the road, but they only did business during the daytime, and, at any rate, Youko didn’t have any money, so her meals pretty much tapered off to nothing.

When the hunger got too much to bear, she checked her indignation and looked for work. But the towns were flooded with refugees and there was no work to be had. She certainly couldn't expect to be hired when she looked for all the world like a helpless child.

The youma showed up every night, and, just to make things that much worse, sometimes during the day. On top of it all, there were the visions she saw in the sword and the blue monkey tormenting her.

Watching her mother cry was heartbreaking. She couldn't shake tempting thoughts of how much better things would be if that monkey were dead. Nevertheless, the desire to just see her mother, to see the place where she used to live, always won out. Just as the desire to talk to somebody, anybody always prevailed.

The sword's visions visited her at night, responding to her longings to go home. Whether the sword's extraordinary powers only showed themselves at night, or whether it was simply because that's when she was more often awake, Youko didn't know.

On the nights that the youma's relentless attacks didn't give her time to think about home, those nights left her body sore. The nights she did have time, those nights left her heart hurting. She knew that she ought to ignore it when the sword started to glow, but she lacked the resolve to do so.

On this night as well, the phosphorescent light was gathering above the blade. She had fled from the youma, forged her way into the mountains, and was resting against a white tree.

She had seen the white trees here and there deep in the mountains. They were like no trees she had seen before. The bark was pure white, the branches reached as wide as a house, though not very high. She didn't think the uppermost branches were more than six or seven feet off the ground.

The leafless branches hung low to the ground, slender but so incredibly hard that not even the sword could cut through them. It was like the branches were made from some kind of white metal. Yellow fruit was ripening on the branches, but it too held as firmly as if welded on.

The white trees glowed even in the darkness, all the more so when the moon was out. Youko found them quite pleasing to look at.

Despite the low-hanging branches, when she had slipped through and crawled up next to the trunk, there was enough space to sit down. For some reason, youma attacked less frequently when she was beneath these white trees, and the wild dogs hardly bothered her at all. So when she needed to take a break, the trees were her first resort.

Concealed under the tree, leaning back against the trunk, Youko looked at the sword. Ten days had passed since meeting that old man, the other kaikyaku, in Takkyuu.

The sword cast off a faint light, the illuminated branches of the tree sparkled brightly. The fruit of the tree glowed in golden hues.

Instead of seeing her mother as usual, a number of people appeared, moving about. A group of young women, wearing black uniforms, in a room filled with rows of desks.

That's my classroom.

The girls seemed to be just hanging around, the kind of between-classes scene she was well used to. Seeing their beautiful blow-dried hair, pressed outfits, clean, white skin and comparing them to her present condition made Youko laugh out loud.

“Youko Nakajima, I heard she ran away.”

Her friend’s familiar-sounding voice got the ball rolling. All at once, a storm of lively chatter rained down on Youko’s ears.

“Ran away from home? You’re kidding!”

“It’s the truth! She wasn’t sick yesterday. She ran away. Last night, I got a call from her mother. I was totally surprised!”

This must be from some time ago.

“I can’t believe it!”

“And she was class president!”

“Yeah, with those serious types, you never know what they’re up to when nobody’s looking.”

“That’s for sure.”

Youko had to laugh again. Her reality was so different from what they could imagine.

“Like there was this weird guy who showed up and took off with her. I heard he was a real gangbanger type.”

“A guy? You think they were doing it?”

“Yeah, you think they eloped?”

“I heard that, too. You know how all the windows in the principal’s office got broken? It was her boyfriend who did it.”

“Serious?”

“Hey, this guy, what was he like?”

“I don’t really know, but he had this long, bleached hair that gave off a real creepy vibe.”

“I never would have figured that Nakajima was into the metal scene.”

“Or something like that.”

Keiki. . . .

Youko hovered there like a ghost, unable to move as she watched the commotion play out before her.

“Like, everybody knows she dyed her hair.”

“Didn’t she say it was her natural color?”

“There’s no way! I mean, nobody’s hair naturally turns that color.”

“But I heard she left her backpack and coat in the classroom.”

“Yeah, what was that about?”

“It was yesterday morning, somebody said that Moritsuka found them.”

“But she ran off with that guy, didn’t she? And with just the clothes on her back!”

“Don’t be stupid. But if she *didn’t* run away, then that means she just up and disappeared.”

“Scary. . . .”

“Sooner or later, we’re going to see those posters up at the train station.”

“Stuff up on billboards, her mom walking around, handing out flyers.”

“Like, have you seen this girl? That kind of thing.”

“Hey, you guys are getting way carried away with this.”

“Yeah, it’s got nothing to do with us.”

“She ran away from home, that’s all.”

“That’s right. It’s only when it happens to an honor student that everybody gets all bent out of shape.”

“She took off with her boyfriend. Nobody wants to admit it, but when a girl falls for a guy like that, nothing she does is going to make any sense at all.”

“That’s harsh. You were friends with her, weren’t you?”

“I never did much more than talk to her. To tell the truth, I didn’t like her that much.”

“I know. It was always like she was better than the rest of us.”

“Definitely.”

“I heard her parents were super strict, always on about how she was supposed to be a ‘young lady.’”

“That’s what I’m saying. But it sure was useful, her always getting her homework done on time.”

“True, true. Fact is, I haven’t even touched today’s math assignment.”

“Hey, me, neither.”

“Didn’t anybody?”

“Nobody besides Nakajima.”

“Youko, come back, please!”

Bright laughter gushed forth. At once, the fraternal scene before her blurred, grew dim. The images bent and distorted, the figures dissolved away. Then in a twinkle, vanished. The light went out and all there was left was the blade of the sword.

Chapter 30

4-6 Youko lowered the sword, now painfully heavy in her hand. She had known all along, deep in her heart, that those she called her friends were not her friends at all.

For a brief moment of their lives they had been stuck together, shut up cheek by jowl in a little cage. Next year, they would end up in different homerooms and forget about each other. After they graduated, they would probably never meet again.

Even so, the tears welled up.

She knew these relationships were temporary at best. Yet, and perhaps all the more so, she had hoped to discover some greater truth hidden inside. She wished she could fly back to that classroom, plead her case before them. How would they respond then, she wondered.

They were living far from here in a peaceful country, young women who undoubtedly believed they experienced much misery and woe in their lives. Once upon a time, the same had been true of her.

The thought made Youko laugh so hard she ended up rolling around on the ground clutching her stomach. Curled up like that in a fetal position, it struck her that she was alone, truly alone, totally cut off from the rest of the world.

When she fought with her parents, when she had a falling out with her friends, or when she simply felt down for a spell and told herself how lonely she was, hadn’t that been little more than an indulgence? She had a home to go home to, people who would not turn against her at the drop of a hat, who would console her. And if all that went away, she could make more friends soon enough, even if they were only fair-weather friends.

Just then, she heard the sound of a voice that, as many times as she had heard it, she still could not stand. Curled up on the ground, she grimaced.

“You can’t go back, I keep telling you.”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“But as long as you are thinking about it, shall we consider the substance of your hypothetical? Even supposing you could go back, nobody would be waiting for you. You simply are not a person worth waiting for.”

In some way, the monkey’s appearances were connected to the visions she saw in the sword. The blue monkey always showed up immediately after she saw a vision. It never did her any physical harm. It’s just that he never said anything she wanted to hear, and in that grating tone of voice. Moreover, Jouyuu did not react to him in the slightest.

“My mother is!”

There came to her mind the image from another vision of her mother petting the stuffed doll. Even if she could not call her friends real friends, she could count on her mother to stand by her. A sudden welling up of homesickness made her chest hurt.

“My mom was crying for me. That’s why, someday, I know I’m going home.”

The monkey laughed all the harder. “But of course. She’s your mother, after all. It’s always so sad for a parent to lose a child.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Youko raised her head above the underbrush. There was the monkey’s head, bathed in blue light, close enough to touch with her outstretched arm.

“Oh, she’s not sad because *you* have gone missing, little girl. She’s sad because *her child* is gone. Her sorrow amounts to nothing more than that. Can you not even understand this much?”

It was like getting hit in the stomach. Youko couldn’t think of how to respond.

“If, for example, the child in question were not you—were perhaps the black sheep of the family—she would react the same. That is the kind of creatures mothers are.”

“Enough.”

“Oh, now don’t you go giving me those angry looks. I tell you nothing but God’s honest truth.” The monkey howled with laughter, laughter that resounded brightly in ear-piercing shrieks. “It’s the same as any domesticated animal. You raise the creature and it gets attached to you, now, doesn’t it?”

“Shut up!” She sprang to her feet, brandishing the sword.

“Oh, I’m scared, I’m scared.” The monkey went on laughing. “You miss your parents, don’t you? Even parents like yours.”

“I’m not listening.”

“I understand, little girl. There’s no place like home, there’s no place like home. Not that you’re absolutely *dying* to see your parents again. What you want to go back to is a warm house and your playmates.”

“What are trying to say?”

The monkey giggled cheerfully. “No worries about being betrayed by your parents, right? Are you sure? But aren’t you really nothing more than a pet?”

“Your point is?”

“That you, pet, are no different than a dog or cat. All goes swimmingly as long as you are gentle and affectionate. But bite the master’s hand or chew up the furniture, then what? They won’t beat you because they have reputations to protect. And yet, were society to look the other way, there’d be no end to the number of parents who’d like to strangle the little tykes.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it? Perhaps it is.” The monkey looked teasingly at her, playful eyes wide. “Parents do think so well of themselves for doting on their children. No, by gosh, I’ve got that wrong. It’s how well they *play* the part of the loving parent, that’s what they love about themselves the most.”

The monkey’s spirited screeches hurt her ears.

“You. . . .”

“True of you, too, eh?”

Youko stopped with her hand on the hilt of the sword.

“Playing the good child was fun, no? Because then you could take everything your parents said as right, right? Yet you still had that feeling you’d be punished if you disobeyed, which makes you no better than the dog who carries his master’s favor, no?”

Youko bit her lip. She never worried about getting physically punished. But getting yelled at, or coming home to that heavy, brooding atmosphere, or not being allowed to buy something she wanted, or the imposition of other penalties—those were the things that weighed her down, that without her really knowing it, made her continuously attentive to her parents’ moods.

“It’s not true that you were the good child. Not a good child at all. You were scared of rejection, so you made yourself a *convenient* child for your parents to have around.”

“And your *good* parents—well, that is a lie as well. Not good parents at all, always looking over their shoulders, afraid of what people might be saying behind their backs. You think that liars who flock together never betray each other? Oh, you will betray your parents. And your parents will certainly betray you. It is the way of all flesh. We tell each other our lies and the betrayed betrays the betrayer.”

“You son of a bitch.”

The monkey shrieked hilariously. “Oh, what a fine tongue you have on you. Yes, yes, I am a son of a bitch, but an honest son of a bitch. I never lie. I alone will never betray you. It is most unfortunate that I must be the one to teach you this lesson.”

“Shut the hell up!”

“No, no, you can’t go home. You’d be better off dead. But if you haven’t the courage to die, you had better find yourself a better way to live.”

The monkey eyed Youko’s raised sword. “Another truth I shall tell you. You have no allies. Nothing but enemies. Even Keiki is your enemy. Your stomach is empty? You wish a better life for yourself? He won’t help you. Instead, why not use that thing to shake a few people down?”

“Be quiet!”

“Hither and thither, everywhere you look, nothing but dirty little moneygrubbers. Extort yourself a little cash. *That* is the way to a better life.”

Youko swung the sword in the direction of the ear-piercing screeches, but there was nothing there. Only the loud laughter fading away into the dark night.

She tore at the ground, her hands bent into crooked tongs. She felt tears spilling down between her fingers.

Chapter 31

4-7 Youko wandered the backroads. She lost track of how many days had passed since leaving Takkyuu, or for that matter, how long it had been since she left home. She had no idea where she was or where she was going, and by this point, she didn't much care.

When the night came, she drew the sword and stood her ground. When the enemy came, they fought. When the morning came, she found a place to make her bed and slept. And so her life went on.

Gripping the jewels and using the sword as a cane became natural to her. If there were no enemies about, she sat down. When they attacked at longer intervals, she dragged herself along. If there were no people around, instead of talking, she moaned and groaned constantly.

Her hunger became attached to her thoughts. It became part of her consciousness. When starvation threatened, she flayed the dead body of a youma. It had a strange smell and she could not even hold the meat in her mouth. Occasionally, she brought down a wild animal. She tried to eat it, but her body could not handle solid food.

She struggled through countless nights to meet the dawn. She left the road and tried forging deeper into the mountains. She tripped over a tree root and tumbled down a long slope. Casting care aside, she slept where she fell. She did not even bother to scout out her surroundings first.

She slept without dreams. When she awoke, she found she could not stand, no matter how hard she tried. She was in a shaded hollow within a sparse copse of trees. The sun was already setting and night was falling. If she stayed here like this, if she could not get up and move, she would become a youma's next meal. Even against impossible odds, Jouyuu could hold off one or two attacks. Beyond that, her body would become a useless tool.

Youko dug her fingers into the earth. No matter what, she had to get back to the road.

If she couldn't get back to the road and find somebody to help her, she would die here. She raised her head and searched for the jewels. But even gripping the jewels with all her might, she could not drive the sword into the ground to leverage herself up.

"No one's coming to help," an unexpected voice said.

Youko turned her head. This was the first time she had heard him during the daytime.

"You might as well make yourself comfortable right here, no?"

All Youko could focus on was the monkey's fur, shimmering like blown powder. All she could think was, why was he showing up now?

"Even if you do manage to crawl back to the road, you'll probably only end up getting arrested. Though if you asked for help, they might give it. They might be the type who would put you out of your misery, just like that."

That was undoubtedly what would happen, she thought as well.

She wouldn't ask anybody for help. Now when her need was the most pressing was when she should expect help the least. Even if she got to the road, there would be no help forthcoming. If somebody were to pass along the way, they would look the other way. This filthy vagrant would provoke nothing more than a grimace.

On the other hand, maybe she'd only get mugged. But a thief would figure out pretty quick she didn't have anything worth stealing and take the sword. Perhaps he would be kind enough to finish her off there and then. That was the kind of place this was.

Then all at once, a new thought occurred to her. The monkey, he fed off her hopelessness and despair. Like some kind of emotional vampire, he exposed all the anxieties and insecurities hidden in her heart and used them to crush her spirits.

Youko giggled. It felt good unraveling this small puzzle. She rolled over, gathered strength into arms, and pushed herself into a sitting position.

“Now, wouldn’t it be easier if you threw in the towel?”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Why not take it easy?”

“Shut it.”

Youko drove the sword into the ground. Her strained knee almost gave out. She screamed, grabbed hold of the hilt of the sword, caught herself. She almost stood, but lost her balance. Her body was too heavy to move like this. It’d be better to crawl along the ground, like an animal newly born.

“You want to live that badly, do you? And what will living get you?”

“Home.”

“Oh, why torment yourself so? No matter how much you hold on to life now, you can’t go back.”

“I’m going home.”

“You cannot go home. There is no way to cross the Kyokai. Here, in this country, you will be betrayed and you will die.”

“You’re lying.”

She would trust only the sword. Youko gripped the hilt and focused on the strength in her hands. Depend on no one, trust no one. Only the sword would protect her.

And then. . .?

Keiki had brought her here and he never said anything about *not* going home. Finding Keiki was probably the only way. Right now, that was all she could hope for.

“Didn’t I tell you that Keiki was your enemy?”

I’m not going to think about it.

“Do you really think he will help you?”

Either way.

Whether friend or foe, finding Keiki and finding out for herself would be preferable to wandering around like this without a clue. When she meets him she would ask him why he brought her here, ask him how she could get back. She’d get the whole story out of him.

“Supposing you do go home, then what? Eh? You think then you’ll live happily ever after?”

“Be quiet.”

She knew what he was saying. She couldn’t forget the nightmares she’d had about this place. She couldn’t pretend that nothing had happened and go back to the way things were before. There were no guarantees about her appearance, either. And if not, then the Youko Nakajima that used to be was gone forever.

“What a miserable creature, what an everlasting fool you are, little girl.”

With the monkey’s bright, loud laughter ringing in her ears, Youko roused herself once more. She didn’t really understand why she was doing it. She was miserable, she was a fool. Nonetheless, if this was enough to make her give up, then she should have given up a long time ago.



Youko considered the current state of her body. She was covered with wounds, caked with blood and mud, her clothing reduced to reeking rags. But she didn't give a damn about her appearance, if that's what it took. Throwing away her life was no longer such a simple proposition. If she was indeed better off dead, then she should have died on the roof of the school when the kochou first attacked her.

It wasn't because she didn't want to die. It probably wasn't because she wanted that badly to live. It simply was because she did not want to give up.

She was going home. Without a doubt, she would return to the place she so deeply longed for. As for what awaited her there, she'd cross that bridge then. Because going home meant staying alive, she would protect herself. She wasn't about to die in a place like this.

Youko clung to the sword and pulled herself to her feet. She thrust the sword again into the rising slope and began climbing the brush-covered hill. No hill she had ever known had been so excruciating, covering so short a distance so slowly. Numerous times, her feet slipped out from under her. She urged on her battered self, focused on the objective above her. She at last reached the end of the gauntlet, grasping the shoulder of the road with her outstretched hands.

She dug in her fingers and crawled up to the surface of the road. With a groan, she pulled her body onto the mountain road and fell prostrate on level ground. At the same time, she heard a faint sound. The sound came from the far side of the road. A bitter smile came unbidden to her lips.

Oh, perfect.

Youko hated this world with all her heart. Approaching the road was a sound like the wail of a crying baby.

Chapter 32

4-8 The pack of dog beasts came at her in a rush, the same ones that had attacked her before on the mountain road. Swinging the heavy sword, she dispatched most of them and was soon drenched with blood.

A dog beast leapt at her. She decapitated it. Suddenly, she found herself down on one knee, a deep bite wound in her left calf. She felt no pain, as if the limb were numbed, though from the ankle down, the pain was intense. She glanced at her blood-soaked leg then surveyed the road for any lingering foes. One dog remained.

This dog beast was bigger than all the rest she had felled. The difference in its physical strength was obvious as well. She had delivered two solid blows to it already and it hardly looked winded.

The beast crouched low against the ground. She sized up their positions and corrected the grip on the sword. The weapon had almost become an extension of her own body, yet it was so heavy she could barely keep the tip on target. She felt a dizziness verging on vertigo. Her consciousness began to cloud over.

She swung the sword at the shadow that bounded toward her. The blade did not so much cut as it slapped against it. Taking everything Jouyuu had to give, she could not deliver a second blow.

The slap from the sword was enough to send the black beast sprawling. An instant later, it was back on its feet, flinging itself towards her. She aimed at its snout, and could do nothing more than thrust the sword forward.

The tip of the blade ripped through the beast's face. At the same time, its claws tore into her shoulders. The shock of collision jarred the sword loose from her grasp. She managed to grab hold, and with a shout, turned on the fallen beast and swung down with all her strength.

Her energy exhausted, she stumbled forward, collapsed. Somehow, the sword had pierced the beast's neck. The sword was staked into the ground through a patch of black fur. Dark blood spotted the earth around the end of the blade.

Youko could not move from where she had fallen, but then, neither could her foe. The two of them lay not more than a yard apart. They each raised their heads and guardedly examined the other's predicament.

Youko's sword was pinned to the earth. Her opponent exhaled foamy blood.

They exchanged brief glances. Youko moved first. She grasped the hilt of the sword with enfeebled hands, and, with the buried end supporting her weight, pulled herself to her feet.

A moment later, her opponent roused itself and almost immediately collapsed.

Somehow, she managed to pull the blade out of the ground. It was an anchor on her arm. She closed the distance between them, sank to her knees, and with both hands, brought the sword down.

Her foe lifted its head and howled, gushing foamy blood. Its paws clawed weakly at the ground. It could not right itself. Holding the sword up with both arms, she aimed for the beast's neck, letting the weight of the sword by itself do the damage. The blade, shiny with blood and fat, sank into the fur. The beast's claws sprang out, its limbs convulsed.

It spewed more frothy blood, almost seemed to mutter something to itself.

With every ounce of strength she had left, she raised the heavy sword and let it fall. This time, the beast did not even twitch.

The sword had embedded itself halfway through the creature's neck. Youko let go of the hilt, rolled over on her back. Clouds hung low against the dome of the sky.

After lying there for a while, staring up at the sky, she gulped air and screamed. There was a burning pain in her side. Every breath tore at her throat. She could feel nothing in her extremities, as if her arms and feet had been amputated.

She was grasping the jewels but could not even move her fingertips. Suppressing a sense of dizziness that verged on seasickness, she watched the clouds roll by. A part of the sky was stained a faint madder red.

She was suddenly overcome by the urge to vomit. She turned her head to the side and threw up. The corrosive-smelling bile ran down her cheek. She took a breath but couldn't breathe. She gagged and choked, instinctively turned over and coughed violently.

I'm still alive. Somehow, she was alive. As the hacking coughs wracked her body, this was the thought that turned over and over in her mind. When she at last brought her breathing under control, she heard a faint sound, the sound of footsteps.

Oh God! Were her enemies still around? She lifted her head. Her vision spun, blackness closed in. Her head dropped back to the earth.

She couldn't get up. But within those brief moments, the image that swam into her reeling gaze embedded itself in her mind.

The color of gold.

Keiki!

Still flat on her back, she cried out, "Keiki!"

Of course it would be you, Keiki. You sent these youma.

"Why? Just tell me why!"

The footsteps were very close now. Youko raised her head. She caught sight first of a brilliantly colored kimono. Then the golden hair.

"Why. . .?"

There was no reply to any of her questions.

Craning her head backwards, she realized it was not Keiki's face. "Oh," she said. Not Keiki. A woman. The woman peered down at her. Youko stared into her eyes. She said, "Who are you?"

She was a woman with golden hair, maybe ten years older than Youko. On her slender shoulders perched a brightly-colored parrot. The woman's extraordinarily beautiful face was suffused with sadness. Staring up at her, it struck Youko that she was on the verge of weeping.

"Who are you?" Youko asked in a hoarse voice.

The woman looked at her and said nothing. Tears gathered in the woman's crystal clear eyes.

"What. . . ."

The woman blinked slowly. Tears fell softly down her cheeks. She averted her eyes. Youko was too taken aback to speak. The woman turned her attention to the beast lying next to Youko. She gazed at it with a sorrowful expression, then slowly stepped forward. She knelt down next to the corpse.

Youko could do nothing but watch. No words came, she couldn't move her body. She had been trying all along to rouse herself, but she couldn't move a finger.

The woman gently reached out and stroked the beast. The tips of her fingers touched a patch of red and she jerked back her hand as if she had touched something searing hot.

"Who are you?"

The woman didn't answer. She reached out again, grasped the hilt of the sword—the blade was still embedded in the beast's neck—pulled it free, and set it on the ground. She eased the beast's head into her lap.

"Did you send them after me?"

The woman didn't speak. She cradled the beast in her lap, petted its coat. Her luxurious kimono was soon stained with clotted blood.

"And all the youma who've attacked me up to now? What do you have against me?"

Hugging the beast's head, the woman shook her head. Youko raised her eyebrows. The parrot perched on the woman's shoulder flapped its wings.

"Kill her."

The shrill voice no doubt belonged to the parrot. Startled, Youko looked at it. The woman opened her eyes and glanced at the parrot as well.

"Put an end to this."

The woman spoke for the first time. "I cannot."

"Kill her. Finish her off."

The woman shook her head emphatically. "Please! That is the one thing I cannot do!"

"I am giving you an order. Kill her."

"I cannot!"

The parrot beat its wings and soared into the sky. It circled once and glided back to the earth. "THEN TAKE THE SWORD."

"The sword is hers. It would be pointless to take it." There were echoes of pity and supplication in the woman's voice.

"Then cut off her arm." The parrot spoke in a loud, shrill voice. It flapped its wings vigorously. "I shall ask this much of you. Cut off her arm so she cannot wield the sword."

"I cannot. First of all, I cannot use that sword."

"Then use this one."

The parrot opened its beak wide. Something glittered deep in its mouth behind its round tongue. Youko stared disbelievingly as the parrot coughed up the tip of a glossy black rod. Before her startled eyes, inch by inch, the bird continued to disgorge the full length of a Japanese-style sword in a black scabbard.

"Take it."

The woman's face was white with despair. "Please, I beg of you."

The parrot once more flapped its wings. "DO IT!"

As if struck physically, the woman covered her face with her hands. Youko pawed at the earth. She had to get up and get out of here. Yet the best she could do was rake the ground with her fingers.

The woman turned towards Youko, her face wet with tears.

"Stop." Youko's voice was so hoarse she could barely hear herself speak.

The woman reached down and seized the sword the parrot had disgorged. Her hands were soiled with the blood of the dog beast.

"Don't do this. . . what kind of person are you?"

What kind of thing was that parrot? What kind of creatures were those beasts? Why was this happening to her?

The woman's lips scarcely moved. *Forgive me*, Youko barely heard her say.

"Please. . . don't."

The woman aimed the tip of the sword at the spot on the ground where Youko's right hand clawed the earth. As strange as it might seem, it was the woman who looked about ready to keel over; she was so gray.

Observing this, the parrot flew over and perched on Youko's arm. Its thick talons dug into her flesh. For some inexplicable reason, the bird was as heavy as a boulder. Youko wished to fling it off her arm but couldn't budge an inch.

The parrot cawed, "**DO IT!**"

The woman raised the sword.

"God, no!"

Youko exercised every ounce of strength left in her, but she was too weak, the weight of the parrot riding her arm too heavy, and the woman drove the sword down faster than she could possibly move.

She felt nothing, only the shock of the impact.

Youko was not even sure she was still alive. Before shock could turn into pain, she lost consciousness.

Chapter 33

4-9 The awful pain brought her back to life.

As soon as her eyes opened, she checked her arm. There was the sword that had stabbed her. At first, she didn't understand what she was looking at. The sword stood erect, hilt pointing skyward.

Seconds later, the pain brought her back to her senses. The sword pinned her right hand to the earth, the slender blade buried deeply through the palm. Throbbing pain radiated up her arm and into her head. Gently, she tried moving her arm. The pain tearing through her hand made her scream.

Swallowing the dizziness and pain, taking care not to make the pain in her hand any worse, she sat herself up. With her trembling left hand, she seized the hilt of the sword. She closed her eyes, clenched her teeth together, yanked out the sword. Pain convulsed her body.

She cast the sword aside, pressed her wounded hand to her chest, rolled on the ground over to where the beast had fallen. She didn't cry out. The intensity of the pain was enough to make her physically sick.

Writhing in agony, she groped for the jewels, tore them free of the cord. She gritted her teeth and pressed the jewels hard against her hand. Groaning, her body twisted into a ball.

The magic of the jewels saved her. The pain abated a bit. After a few minutes more, holding her breath, she could bear to sit up again. She applied the jewels to the wound, cautiously tried to move her fingers, but couldn't feel anything below the wrist. She continued to force her right hand around the jewels.

Rocking back and forth, she hugged her hand against her body. She cracked open her eyes and looked up at the sky. The red-stained clouds were still there. She hadn't been unconscious that long.

Who was the woman? Why did she do this to her? So many things were racing through her mind, but she was in no condition to think about anything. After searching around some more, she found the sword. She took hold of the hilt and hugged the sword and her right hand to her chest. For a while she stayed curled up that way.

Not a long time had passed when she heard a voice say, "Oh. . . ."

She looked in the direction of the voice. A small child was standing there. The girl looked over her shoulder and yelled, "Mom!"

A woman hurried towards them at a small run.

Youko's expression said that the child had not bothered her. Her mother seemed an honest type. Her appearance betrayed her low economic status. She carried a large pack on her back.

Similar looks of concern rose to the faces of mother and child as they ran toward her. They jumped over the bodies of the dead beasts, grimacing with distaste.

Youko couldn't move. She could only watch helplessly from where she lay. *They'll help me*, she thought, for only a moment, before more anxiety overcame her. This was one time when she really needed help. The worst of the pain had subsided, but had hardly disappeared. All her strength was exhausted. She doubted she could even get up a second time.

So she felt more suspicion than relief. It was all too good to be true.

“What’s going on? Are you all right?”

The girl touched Youko’s face with her small hand. Her mother put her arms around her and helped her sit up. For some reason, Youko found the body-warm touch of the woman’s clothing repulsive.

“What in the world happened to you? You were attacked by these beasts? Are you badly injured?”

As she spoke, the woman’s attention was drawn to Youko’s right hand. She let out a small cry. “What is this? Hold on.”

She searched in the sleeve of her kimono and extracted a strip of cloth the size of a hand towel. She used it to bind Youko’s hand. The girl took the small pack off her own back, took out a bamboo container, and held it out to Youko.

“Sir, you want some water?”

Youko hesitated. She couldn’t shake her sense of unease. The canteen had been in the girl’s pack, so it must be for the girl’s own use. There shouldn’t be any poison in it. And the canteen didn’t look like it had been tampered with in the meantime.

Having reassured herself, she nodded. The girl removed the stopper, and with her two small hands, held the canteen to Youko’s lips. The lukewarm water flowed down her throat. In a stroke, her breathing eased considerably.

The mother said, “You’re probably hungry.”

At the moment, her stomach did not feel empty, but Youko knew she was starving so she nodded.

“How much can you eat?”

She couldn’t think to come up with an amount, and so remained silent.

“Mom, there’s some fried bread.”

“No, no, that’d be no good. She’d never get it down. What about something sweet?”

“Sure.”

The child opened the mother’s pack. Inside were a variety of jars of different sizes. With a stick, she drew out the thick syrup. Youko had seen people carrying these kinds of containers before. They were probably syrup peddlers.

“Here you go.”

Youko didn’t hesitate this time. She took the stick with her left hand. The syrup melted sweetly in her mouth.

“Are you traveling somewhere? What happened to you?”

Youko didn’t answer. She didn’t want to tell the truth, and it would be too tiring to think up a lie.

“I dare say, you seem well enough for being attacked by youma. Can you stand up? The sun will be setting soon. There’s a village not far off, at the foot of the mountain. Can you walk that far?”

Youko shook her head. She meant to say that she didn’t wish to go to the village, but the woman took her to mean she could not move. She turned to the child and said, “Run to Gyokuyou and have someone come here. There’s not much time. As fast as you can.”

“Yes, Mom.”

Youko sat up. “I’m okay.” She said to the mother and child, “I thank you both very much.”

She spoke brusquely, by way of turning down the offer. She managed to get to her feet and crossed the road to the steeply rising slope on the other side.

“Just a minute, where are you going?”

Youko didn't know herself. So she didn't answer.

“Wait. The sun is almost down. If you head into the mountains, you'll die for sure.”

Youko slowly crossed the road. Her hand hurt with every step.

“Let's go to the village.”

The grade here was quite precarious. Climbing the slope with only one hand would take considerable effort.

“We're traveling merchants. We're going as far as Bakurou. You've nothing to fear from us. Let's go to the village, shall we?”

Youko caught hold of a root growing out of the roadbed.

“Wait, what's the hurry? Why aren't you taking this seriously?”

Youko glanced back over her shoulder. The woman stared at Youko, her eyes wide with bewilderment, like the child immobilized by her consternation.

“Please, let me be. If I do go with you to the village, what will be waiting for me there?”

“What has that to do with anything? The sun is setting! You're injured. . . .”

“Yes, indeed. You'd better hurry. You have a small child with you.”

“Wait. . . .”

“I'm used to it. Thank you for the sweets.”

The woman looked at Youko in confusion. It was possible she was simply acting out of kindness. Or possibly not. Youko couldn't know for sure which.

She started once more to climb the slope. Below her, the child called out. She held out both hands towards Youko. In one hand was the bamboo canteen, in the other, a teacup filled to the brim with the syrup.

“Take these. It wasn't enough, what we gave you before.”

Youko looked to the mother. “But. . . .”

“It's okay. Well, then, onto Gyokuyou.”

At her mother's urging, the child reached out and placed the cup and canteen at Youko's feet. She jumped down, ran back to where her mother was strapping on her pack.

Youko watched blankly as the child pulled on her own pack. She had no idea of how to respond. The mother and child glanced back at her many times as they descended the hill.

After they had disappeared from view, Youko picked up the canteen and teacup. Her knee gave out and she sat down on the ground.

It's better this way.

She couldn't know for certain that they were acting out of the best of intentions. After arriving at the village, perhaps their attitude would have changed. Even if it didn't, once they found out Youko was a kaikyaku, she'd be hauled off to the county seat. As painful as it might be, she had to take precautions. She couldn't trust anybody, couldn't expect anything. The minute she got careless and naïve, she paid for it the hard way.

“They just might have helped you, you know?”

Again, that intolerable voice. Youko answered without turning around. “It may have been a trap.”

“Perhaps, but you won't see that kind of help again.”

“It may have been no help at all.”

“Considering the state of your body and hand, will you make it through the night?”

“One way or another.”

“You better chase after them, no?”

“I’m fine here.”

“Little girl, you have gone and thrown away the first and last real chance you’ll ever get.”

“Shut up!”

Youko turned, sweeping wide with the sword. The monkey’s head was gone. Only its bright laughter remained, disappearing up the slope and into the underbrush.

Youko glanced back down the road. Dusk was falling. It began to rain, pebbling the road with small black spots.

Chapter 34

4-10 That night was as bad as any night she’d been through. She was dead on her feet. The cold rain stole away her body heat. Naturally, a bad night for humans was a good night for youma.

Her clothing clung to her, restricting her movement. Her numb, lame limbs would not work the way she wanted. Some sensation had returned to her right hand, but barely enough. Holding the sword was extraordinarily difficult. To make things worse, the hilt became slippery in the rain. She had no idea how many foes there were in the surrounding darkness. And though the youma attacking her were on the small side, there were very many of them.

She was knee-deep in mud, covered with the blood of her victims and the blood flowing from her own wounds. As the rain washed away the blood and mud, it also washed away the last of her strength. The sword was heavy, Jouyuu’s presence weak. The tip of the sword dipped lower and lower with every encounter.

Over and over, she looked up at the sky in supplication, waiting for the dawn. The night had always passed quickly while she was fighting, but on this night in particular, with her enemies coming at her in an endless torrent, it went on fearfully long. Over and over she dropped the sword and was covered in wounds before she could retrieve it. About the time when she finally saw the first signs of daybreak, she also saw the silhouette of one of the white trees.

Youko rolled under the branches of the tree. The hard trunk bruised her back. But that sense of being pursued ceased. Beneath the branches, as she collected her breath, she knew they were still out there, waiting. After a while, they slipped away into the rain.

The sky brightened. Her enemies vanished. She began to make out the outlines of a surrounding grove of trees.

“I made it.”

She took a deep breath. Raindrops fell into her mouth.

“I actually made it.”

She paid no mind to her throbbing, mud-grouted wounds. She lay down, caught her breath, looked up at the sky through the white branches of the tree, and waited for the gray day to come. As her breathing steadied, she became quite cold. The branches did not stop the rain. She needed to slip away from here and find shelter from the rain, but she didn't move.

She desperately clutched the jewels, as if to store up more of the strange energy that warmed her fingertips. Exerting great effort, she rolled over and crawled out from under the tree and dragged her body towards the lower part of the slope. Crawling over the wet grass and ground was not difficult.

She had tried her best to stay to the road, but in the middle of the night, driven on by her foes, she couldn't begin to imagine how deeply into the mountains she had wandered.

Clinging to the jewels and to the sword, she stood up.

She was well aware of her injuries. She understood the nature of the severe pain she was feeling. Still, she could not say exactly *where* she hurt. With each step, she braced herself to keep her knee from buckling.

Half-crawling, she descended the slope and came upon a narrow trail. It didn't look like the main road. She saw no ruts or wheel marks. It was hardly wide enough for a horse cart to pass. This was the end of the line. Sinking to her knees, she dug her fingers into the bark of a tree to support herself, but her hands were of little use to her.

She had been headed towards the wrong road all along. And now she couldn't move another inch.

She held the jewels tightly in her hands. They brought forth no warmth or comfort. Whatever energy they could supply her with, more was washed away by the rain. The jewels had reached the limits of their miraculous powers.

So this is where I die, she thought, and laughed.

Among all her classmates, Youko alone would die the beggar's death. They belonged to a different world. They would always have homes to return to, families who would protect them, futures sure to be free of want or hunger.

She had done the best she could. This was it. She didn't want to give up, but no matter how she tried, she couldn't raise a finger. She had endured to the end, and if an easy death was to be her reward, she supposed she could find some value in the struggle.

Mingled in with the sound of the rain there sounded a clear, high tone. She raised her eyes. The faint light was shining out of the sword lying next to her cheek. From where her head was resting on the ground, she couldn't see the sword itself, but she could see the faint images rising up in the mist from the pounding rain.

And Youko Nakajima? a man's voice asked.

The vice-principal was sitting there. She couldn't make out where he was.

"Youko was a kind and diligent student. At least as far as her teachers are concerned, she was the most agreeable of all our students."

The vice-principal was speaking to somebody. She could hear the interlocutor's voice. It sounded like the voice of a big man.

"You ever hear anything about her getting messed up with the wrong crowd?"

"I wouldn't know."

"You wouldn't know?"

The vice-principal shrugged. “Youko was the model of a perfect student. There was never any reason to question what kind of life she was living or whether she ever strayed from the straight and narrow.”

“A strange boy showed up at your school, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, but my impression was that he wasn’t an acquaintance of hers. But the truth of the matter is, I just don’t know. It always seemed like there were aspects of her character that were a closed book to the rest of us.”

“A closed book?”

The vice-principal’s answer was accompanied by a sullen expression. “That’s not quite what I meant. Let me put it another way. Youko was an honor student. She was on good terms with her classmates as well as with her parents, or so I’ve heard. But that’s simply not possible.”

“Not possible?”

“I may be out of line saying this, but teachers will see things in whatever light favors themselves. Friends do the same. Parents tell you only what’s convenient for them to tell you. They all fashion their own image of the student and try to impose it on everybody else. Now, the opinions of these three parties are never going to agree. A student trying to meet all the expectations of his teachers and parents would find it intolerable. A good kid to you or me won’t be to somebody else. What it comes down to is, in being all things to all people, Youko never got close to anybody, either. It might have been a convenient way to play things, but I suspect it never amounted to much more than a convenience.”

“And how about yourself?”

The vice-principal frowned. “I’m talking about your gut type of reaction, okay? But for most teachers, the few hard-to-handle students—the ones you don’t take your eyes off of—they’re the ones you find endearing, memorable. I always thought Youko was a good student, but I’d probably forget all about her the day after graduation. And at a ten-year reunion, I wouldn’t have the slightest idea who she was.”

“Of course.”

“Whether Youko acted this way on purpose, or whether it was the result of her simply trying to do the right thing, I don’t know. If it was done with deliberation, I can’t imagine what she was trying to hide. And if not, once she realized what she was doing, at some point, it must have struck her as an awfully empty way to live. Wondering what she was doing with her life, seeing it all as meaningless; I don’t think that would have been unusual at all for her to just want to disappear.”

Youko stared with amazement at the vice-principal. The image faded. In his place, a girl appeared, a student, one of Youko’s closer friends.

“I’ve heard you were one of Ms. Nakajima’s best friends.”

The girl flashed him a severe look. “Not really. We were never really that close.”

“No?”

“Yeah. Sure, we talked now and then at school, but we never got together outside of school, never talked on the phone. That was true for most of us. That was about as much as we ever got to know about girls like her.”

“I see.”

“So, frankly, I really don’t know anything about her. I don’t have anything bad to say about her, either.”

“Did you dislike her?”

“She wasn’t particularly unlikable, but she wasn’t all that likeable, either. I got the feeling that, no matter what, she was would always try to say the *appropriate* thing, you know? She wasn’t interesting enough to actually dislike.”

“You don’t say.”

It was another girl who came right out and said she didn’t like her. “Youko, she was a little two-faced brown-noser.”

“Two-faced?”

“Yeah. Like, you know, sometimes you badmouth somebody? If she was there, she’d nod and say, like, yeah, me too. But when somebody else was badmouthing *us*, she’d do the same thing. Always kissing up to whoever she was with. That’s why I couldn’t stand her. There’s no way a person like her has real friends. She was fine to complain to, though. She’d go along with whatever you said. That’s about it.”

“Huh.”

“That’s why I think she just ran away from home. She was probably messing with some gangbangers behind everybody’s back. It wouldn’t surprise me if it all started with a lot of big talk about how dumb we all were and deciding to jerk us around. I could never figure out what was going on with her, anyway.”

“Perhaps she got caught up in something she couldn’t handle.”

“Yeah, you know, like she got into a fight with the *homies* she was hanging with. Not that I would know anything about it.”

It was yet another girl who said she flat-out hated her. “To be honest, I don’t mind her being gone one bit.”

“You said your classmates teased you a lot?”

“Yeah.”

“And Ms. Nakajima went along with it?”

“Yeah. She always went along when they froze me out. But she was the one who always played innocent afterwards.”

“How’s that?”

“They were always giving me crap, you know? Youko never joined in like she really meant it. She always pretended that she was above it all. Fact was, she was a coward.”

“I see.”

“Like she was a better person than anybody else, like she felt sorry for me. But she wouldn’t do anything to stop it. That’s what pissed me off the most.”

“Understandable.”

“Whether she ran away or got kidnapped or whatever, I couldn’t care less. As far as I’m concerned, I was the victim and she was one of the perpetrators. I’m not going to sit here and act all sorry for her. I don’t want to be a hypocrite like her. I suppose that gives me a motive, huh? But I’m glad she’s gone. That’s the truth.”

She’s not that kind of person, her mother insisted. Her mother sat there with a distressed look on her face. “She was a good girl. She wasn’t the kind of girl who would run away from home or get mixed up with such unsavory types.”

“Apparently she wasn’t completely happy at home.”

Her mother looked surprised. "Youko? Nothing of the sort."

"Her classmates had much to say on the subject. 'Her parents are really strict,' things like that."

"We did discipline her at times, but nothing more than what any parent would do. No, that has nothing to do with it. She had nothing to be dissatisfied with at home, not in the least."

"You're saying you knew of no reason for her to run away from home?"

"None at all. She would never do anything like that."

"Are you familiar with this boy who came to see her at school?"

"No. She's not the kind of girl who would associate with such people."

"Well, then, what do you think accounts for her disappearance?"

"Somebody kidnapped her on her way home from school."

"Unfortunately, there is no evidence for that. Youko left the principal's office together with the boy. After that, we believe they went somewhere else. It doesn't mean she wasn't taken against her will. But several of the teachers said that they appeared to be on intimate terms."

Her mother hung her head.

"You say that your daughter didn't have a boyfriend. Perhaps she was involved in some other type of relationship. A shared acquaintance, for example. Anything we could use to begin a search with. . . ."

"Did they really say Youko wasn't happy with the way things were at home?"

"So it seems."

Her mother buried her face in her hands. "I never sensed that there was anything she was unhappy about. She's not the kind of girl who would run away from home, or would make bad friends behind our backs. She's not the kind of girl who would get involved in things like that."

"Teenagers don't usually reveal their true selves to their parents."

"Hearing about what goes on in other people's homes, it does make me wonder what kind of a person Youko really is. When I think about it now, perhaps I should have looked harder at anything that struck me as unusual."

"Indeed, children don't always turn out in ways that are convenient for their parents. My own kid is quite the little brat."

"Yes, I guess that must be it. She always showed us her good side. We dealt with her on the basis of outward appearances and ended up being deceived. Children will use their trust against you."

No, Mom, it's not true. . . .

Youko wanted to weep, but no tears would come. *It's not true*, she wanted to scream, but her mouth only formed the shape of the words. As with the silent click of a switch, the vision disappeared.

The ground around her was covered with puddles, her head half buried in the mud. She did not have the strength left to stand up. No one could have possibly imagined that she would have ended up here, in this condition. Knowing nothing, that's how they could come to such convenient conclusions.

Cast into this world, starving, covered with wounds, not even able to rise, and despite everything, her desire to go home had made it all possible to bear. But in truth, what she had seen were the only human relationships of any merit at all that she could claim in her home country.

What did I think I was going home to?

No one was waiting for her. She had nothing there and no one who understood her. Being deceived, being betrayed, being here or being there, it made no difference at all.

Yes, I get it now.

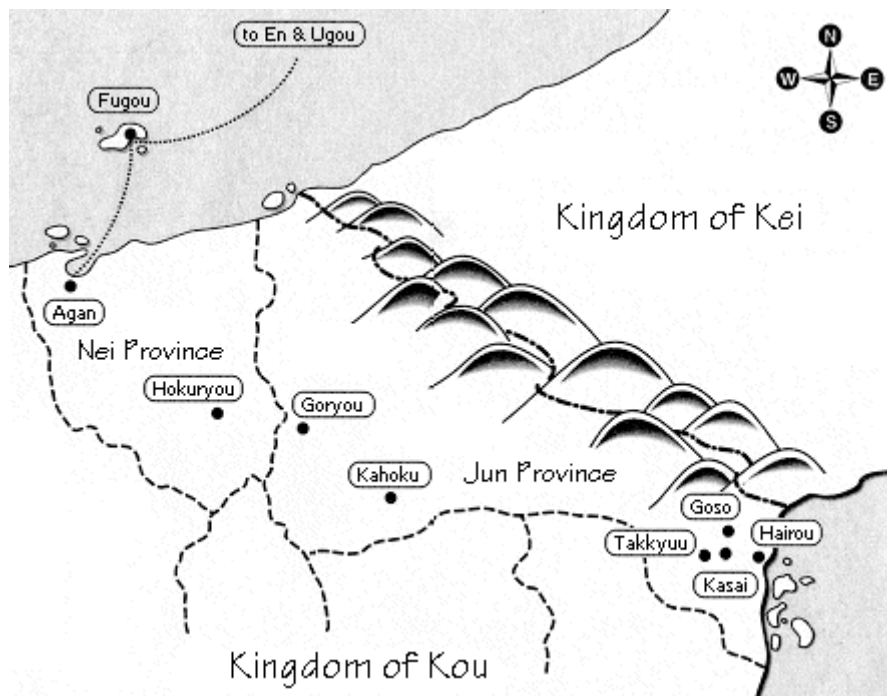
And still, she wanted to go home. She found it strangely funny. She wanted to roar with laughter, but the cold rain had left her face too numb. She wanted to cry as well, but she had no tears left in her.

Whatever.

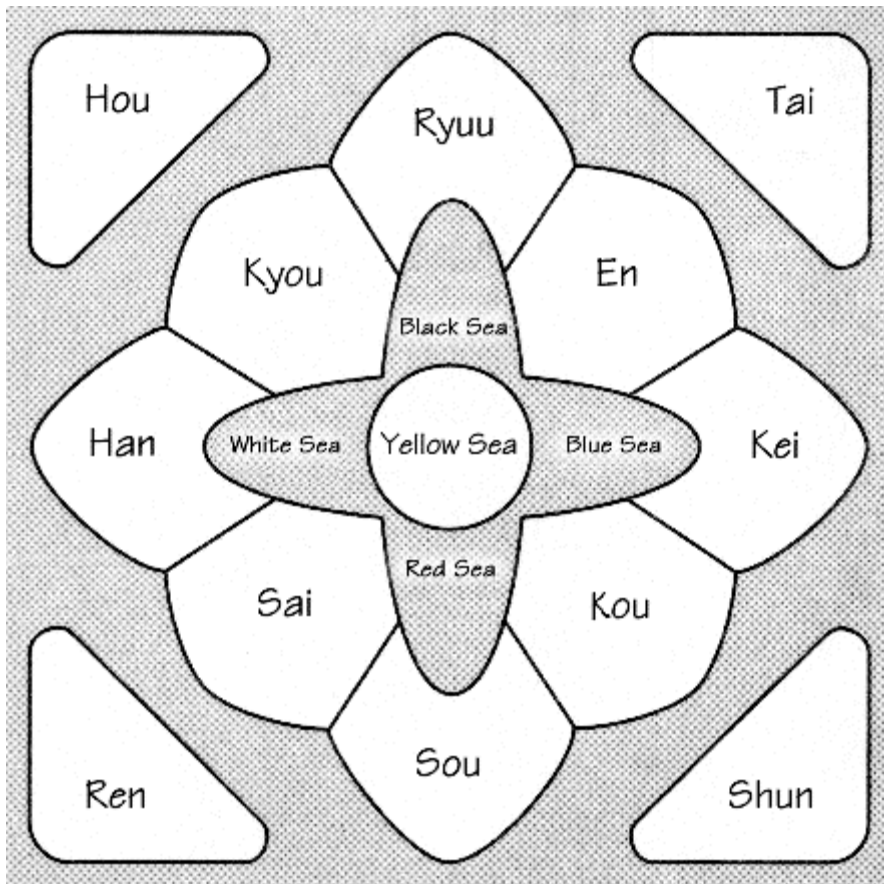
Whatever happened, it was all good. Because very soon, it would all go away.

Maps

The Kingdom of Kou



The Twelve Kingdoms



Glossary

This glossary contains all foreign words (names, places, terms, etc.) found within the novel, *Juuni Kokki: Tsuki no Kage, Kage no Umi* (book 1). Words within translation notes or with no kanji are not included. Definitions are provided, if applicable.

Azuki beans 小豆【あずき】

Red beans.

Futon 布団【ふとん】

Japanese quilt bedding usually laid out on the floor.

Fuyou 符楊【ふよう】

A district in Jun province.

Gosou 五曹【ごそう】

A town located on the eastern part of Kou.

Gyouten 堯天【ぎょうてん】

The capital of the Kei Kingdom.

Hairou 配浪【はいろう】

A town in the Kou Kingdom.

Hinman 賓満【ひんまん】

An incorporeal, red-eyed youma capable of possessing people, especially warriors on battlefields, and controlling their movements. It usually enables the person to fight better. However, it is unable to do anything when the host's eyes are closed.

Hiroshima 広島【ひろしま】

In Seizou's case, he was talking about the Japanese prefecture, Hiroshima-ken (広島県), located on Honshu island. Hiroshima-ken's capital is also named Hiroshima (広島市, Hiroshima-shi).

Jouyuu 冗祐【じょうゆう】

Jun 淳【じゅん】

A province in Kou.

Kaikyaku 海客【かいきやく】

Literally “visitors” (客, *kyaku*) from the “sea” (海, *kai*). They are people from Japan who get caught up in a *shoku* and are brought to the Juuni Kokki world.

Kasai 河西【かさい】

A town in Kou.

Kanji 漢字【かんじ】

Characters used in Japanese writing.

Kei 慶【けい】

A kingdom in the east.

Kimono 着物【きもの】

Generally a long, wide-sleeved Japanese robe.

Kochou 蟲彫【こちょう】

An eagle-like youma with tawny wings and a horn in the center of its forehead.

Kou 巧【こう】

A kingdom towards the southeast.

Kouchi 高知【こうち】

The capital (高知市, *Kouchi-shi*) of Kouchi prefecture (高知県, *Kouchi-ken*), located on the southern coast of Shikoku.

Kure 呉【くれ】

A city in Hiroshima Prefecture.

Kyokai 虚海【きょかい】

Literally the “sea” (海, *kai*) of “emptiness” (虚, *kyo*). *Kaikyaku* go through here to get from Japan to the Juuni Kokki world, but not vice versa.

Luzón

The main island in the Philippines.

Mochi 餅【もち】

A rice cake made traditionally by pounding steamed glutinous rice in a wooden mortar. Dried, it resembles hard paraffin; cooked it becomes a sticky, pasta-like starch.

Moritsuka 森塚【もりつか】

Okinawa 沖縄【おきなわ】

Japan's southernmost prefecture. It consists of an archipelago of hundreds of islands generally known as the Ryukyuu Islands (琉球列島, *Ryuukyuu-rettou*). Its capital is Naha (那覇).

Osaka 大阪【おおさか】

Seizou was referring to the Japanese prefecture, *Osaka-fu* (大阪府), located on Honshu island (本州). Its capital is also named Osaka (大阪市, *Osaka-shi*).

Ri 里【り】

An old unit used to measure distance. While it is supposed to be about 2.44 miles in Japan, the distance is much less in the Juuni Kokki world.

Ritsuko 律子【りつこ】**Rokou** 廬江【ろこう】

A prefecture in Fuyou district.

Sei 成【せい】

A town in Kou.

Seifuku 制服【せいふく】

Literally “uniform.” However, when it comes to a girl's school uniform, it usually refers to a “sailor outfit” (セーラー服, *seeraa-fuku*). There are different designs for different schools. Youko dons the typical type: a navy blue uniform with a pleated skirt.

Seizou Matsuyama 誠三松山【せいぞうまつやま】**Sen** 銭【せん】

The unit of currency in the Juuni Kokki world.

Setonaikai 瀬戸内海【せとないかい】

Literally “Seto Inland Sea,” but it is also known as the “Inland Sea.” It is a body of water separating Honshu (本州), Shikoku (四国), and Kyushu (九州)—three of the main islands in Japan.

Shikoku 四国【しこく】

One of the four main islands in Japan. It is the smallest and least populous of the four.

Shin 郷槇【しん】

A county of Rokou prefecture.

Shoku 蝕【しょく】

Literally “eclipse.” A tempest, or great storm that sometime brings kaikyaku.

Showa Tennou «昭和天皇»【しょうわてんのう】

The Showa Emperor (1901-1989). Reigned from 1926 until his death. He was the reigning emperor during World War II when Seizou was still in Japan.

Sugimoto 杉本【すぎもと】

Suou Sea 周防【すおう】

A sea at the southern end of the Inland Sea (Setonaikai), enclosed to the north and south by Yamaguchi Prefecture and Kyushu Island. Yamaguchi Prefecture was once known as Suou Province, from whence the name derives.

Tai 戴【たい】

A kingdom towards the northeast.

Takki 達姐【たつき】

Takkyuu 拓丘【たつきゅう】

The capital of Fuyou district.

Tatami mat 畳【たたみ】

Traditional Japanese straw floor coverings.

Tokyo 東京【とうきょう】

The current capital of Japan.

Youko Nakajima 陽子中島【ようこなかじま】

Youma 妖魔【ようま】

Generally creatures with inhuman abilities, and usually resemble animals: beasts, demons, monsters, ghosts, etc.