

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 II

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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 V

Chapter 35



rain fell like slender threads scattered by the wind. She couldn't move, couldn't cry, could only lie there listlessly with her cheek in a puddle.

Suddenly she heard the swishing sound of something pushing through the undergrowth. She knew she should hide but could do little more than lift her head.

A villager or a beast or a youma (妖魔). No matter what, the results wouldn't change. Whether she was arrested or attacked or if she simply continued to lie there, her struggles would come to the same end.

She looked up through the mist in the direction of the sound. It was neither a villager nor one of her pursuers. It wasn't a person at all, but a rather strange creature.

It resembled a rat. The way it stood up on its two hind legs and quivered its whiskers, there was a very definite rat-ness about it. Odder still, standing erect, this rat was as tall as a human child. It didn't look like your run-of-the-mill beast or youma. Youko lay there and stared vacantly at this quite curious rat.

The rat was sheltering itself from the rain with a large leaf it wore over its head like a bamboo hat. Silver rain drummed against translucent green. The pearl-colored raindrops were quite beautiful.

The rat stared back at Youko with a slightly stunned expression. It didn't seem to be getting ready to attack her. Its fur was a color somewhere between a light brown and gray. Youko felt an urge to pet it. Raindrops decorated its fluffy coat like jewels. The fur extended all the way down its tail, so though it looked like a rat, it obviously wasn't the same species.

The rat twitched its whiskers several times, then, still on its two hind legs, it toddled closer to Youko. It leaned its gray-brown body over her, and with its small forefoot, it touched her shoulder.

"Are you all right?"

Youko blinked several times. She heard the sound of a child's voice. It was definitely coming from the rat. With a curious expression, the rat politely bowed its head next to hers. "What's the matter? Can't you move?"

Youko looked up into the rat's eyes and just managed to shake her head, no. Perhaps because it wasn't a person, she let her guard down a bit.

"Well." The rat reached out with its small, childlike forefoot. "Try your best. My house isn't far from here."

Ah— Youko sighed. Whether a sigh of relief or of disappointment for being rescued, she couldn't be entirely sure.

"Okay?" the rat said.

She tried to grab its hand but could only move the tips of her fingers. The rat reached down and clasped Youko's cold hand in its small, warm forefoot.

Leaning on an arm stronger than she would have imagined, they made their way to a small house. That was the last thing she remembered.

Many times she had the sense of opening her eyes and taking in her surroundings, but she couldn't grasp what she was looking at or recall what she had seen. Her consciousness alternated between periods of deep sleep and light sleep. When at last she awoke for good, she found herself within a humble abode, lying on a bed.

She stared blankly up at the ceiling, a moment later quickly sat up. She jumped out of bed and collapsed on the floor. Her legs were of no use to her at all.

There was no one else in the small room. Her vision still spinning, she desperately searched around the bed on her hands and knees. There wasn't much in the way of furniture except for a shelf next to the bed fashioned from a few planks of wood. Neatly arranged on the shelf were the sword, shrouded in a bolt of cloth, and the blue jewels, threaded together with a new cord.

With a profound sense of relief, she managed to stand up. She placed the jewels around her neck, and with the sword, returned to the bed. She slipped the sword under the quilt. Finally, she could relax.

At this point, Youko realized that she was wearing a nightdress. Her many wounds had been treated. There was something damp under her shoulder. It was a wet, folded cloth. She had not noticed it when she jumped out of bed. She placed it back on her forehead. It felt good. She drew up the thick quilts, grasped the jewels, closed her eyes, and breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"Are you awake?"

She sat up again in a hurry. Looking back at the source of the voice, she saw the big gray-haired rat standing there. The door was open, and it was coming into the room. In one hand, it held a tray, in the other a pail.

Her sense of wariness reared up inside her. It lived like a person, talked like a person. Just because it looked like an animal didn't mean she could trust it.

Paying no attention to the wary looks Youko was giving it, the rat nonchalantly set the tray on the table, the pail at the foot of the bed.

"How's your fever?"

It reached out with its small forefoot. Youko immediately shrank away. The rat twitched its whiskers and then picked up the damp cloth that had fallen onto the quilt. It must have noticed that Youko had the sword clasped tightly to her chest but said nothing. It placed the cloth in the bucket, looked at Youko's face.

"How are you feeling? Want something to eat?"

Youko shook her head. The rat gave its whiskers a twitch, took a cup from the table. "It's medicine. Will you take it?"

Youko again shook her head. She couldn't take any chances, couldn't expose herself to any possible threats. The rat thought about it for a moment, raised the cup to its mouth, and as she watched, drank a bit. "See, ordinary medicine. A bit bitter, but that's the only way to get it down."

With that, it again offered it to her. Youko refused to take it. Confounded, the rat scratched the fur around its ear. "Well, then. What can I offer you? If you won't drink or

eat anything, you won't get your strength back. How about some tea? Goat milk? Rice pudding?"

Youko refused to answer. The rat sighed to itself, as if trying to figure out what to do next. "You've been asleep for three days. If it was in me to do something like that, I would have had all the time in the world, don't you see."

The rat gestured with the tip of its nose at where Youko had the sword clasped to her chest. "You're even hiding that sword from me. Can you not trust me even that much?"

Youko looked into its small black eyes. Slowly, she took out the cloth-shrouded sword and laid it across her lap.

"Now we're getting somewhere," the rat said in a pleased voice. It reached out again. This time Youko did not shrink away. With its tiny fingers, it briefly touched her forehead. "You've still got a bit of a fever, but it's gone down a good bit. Now, you settle down and rest. Is there anything I can get you?"

Youko said uncertainly, "Water . . ."

The rat's ears flicked back and forth. "Water. Great. So you can speak! I'll bring some water straightaway. If you need to get up, keep yourself wrapped up in that quilt."

Not waiting for Youko to nod in reply, the rat darted out of the room. Its tail, covered in short fur, swayed back and forth as if to help keep its balance.

A few minutes later, the rat returned carrying a pitcher, cup, and small bowl. The almost hot water was delicious. She drained the cup over and over. Then she peered at the bowl, caught the scent of alcohol.

"What have you got there?"

"Peaches pickled in wine and simmered with sugar. Want to try one?"

Youko nodded. Then she turned to the rat and said, "Thank you."

The rat's whiskers quivered. The fur on its cheeks stood out, its eyes narrowed and it smiled, or so that was how its expression struck her.

"My name's Rakushun (楽俊). And you are?"

The question stumped her at first. She simply answered, "Youko (陽子)."

"Youko. And how is it spelled?"

"*You* (陽) as in *youki* (陽氣, cheerful), and *ko* (子) as in *kodomo* (子供, child)."

"*Ko* as in 'child'?" Rakushun tilted his head to the side. "Huh," he said. "That's a curious name. Where are you from?"

As it would be awkward to not answer now, Youko stalled as she wracked her brains. "Kei (慶)."

"The Kingdom of Kei? Where in Kei?"

Not knowing anything more of Kei, she promptly answered, "Hairou (配浪)."

"Where is that?" Rakushun looked at her with an only slightly bewildered look and then scratched at his ears. "Well, that's neither here nor there. Let's take your medicine and get you back to bed."

Youko nodded. She asked, "How do you spell Rakushun?"

The rat laughed. "It's *Raku* (楽) as in *kuraku* (苦楽, sorrow and joy), and *shun* (俊) as in *shunbin* (俊敏, quick-witted)."

Chapter 36

5-2 Youko spent the rest of the day in the room sleeping. She came to the conclusion that Rakushun was the sole occupant of the house.

“It’s got a tail. That can’t be good, eh?” It was the middle of the night. The blue monkey’s head sat at the foot of the bed. “One way or another, he’s bound to betray you, don’t you suppose?”

Though there were two beds in the room, Rakushun didn’t sleep there. She didn’t think the house had another bedroom, so she wasn’t sure where he bedded down for the night.

“Isn’t it about time you skedaddled out of here? If you don’t, he’s bound to steal your life away. No?”

Youko didn’t answer. If she continued to lie there and listen, the blue monkey would just repeat itself over and over. These were her anxieties. The monkey appeared in order to reveal them to her. He fed her fears and then gobbled them down. She was sure that was the way it worked.

Youko turned on her side. The blue monkey smoothly slipped over the covers until its small head rested next to her pillow. He peered at her. “You’ve got to strike first, before something bad happens. Don’t, and you’ll never survive. Isn’t that right, little girl?”

Youko rolled over and stared at the ceiling. “It doesn’t mean that I trust him.”

“Eh?”

“The way things are now, me not being able to move and all, I can’t do anything about it. If I leave before being able to effectively use the sword, I’ll just become some youma’s next meal.”

Not to mention that the wound to her right hand was severe. After a day of pressing the jewels against her hand, she hardly had sufficient strength in her hand to grip the sword.

“He’s going to figure out soon enough that you’re a kaikyaku (海客), no? You really think you should be taking it easy like this? Ah, the governor’s men could be arriving any second.”

“In that case, I’d let my sword do the talking. If four or five of them came at me, I’d get away with my head intact. I can handle things well enough for that.”

There’s no one here I can call an ally.

But she really needed help now. Until she could properly wield the sword again. Until a bit more of her strength returned. Until then, she needed a safe bed, food, and medicine. She didn’t know if Rakushun was on her side or not, but at least he was providing what she desperately needed. Until she knew for certain otherwise, she would take advantage of the situation as things stood.

“He could be poisoning the food, no? How can you be sure that that medicine is really medicine?”

“I’m taking precautions.”

“And I’m telling you that you’ll be outsmarted.”

The blue monkey was venting her doubts and fears. As she answered them one by one, it resembled an exercise in self-examination.

“If he really had in mind to do something to me, he could have done what he wanted when I was unconscious. Even now, even if he wasn’t poisoning the food, he would have had any number of chances to kill me.”

“Perhaps he is waiting for something? Waiting for reinforcements, no?”

“In that case, I’ll save what energy I’ve got till then.”

“In the meantime, he’s getting you to trust him. Then he’ll turn the tables on you.”

“In that case, until Rakushun shows his hand, I’ll keep on pretending to trust him.”

The monkey burst into bright laughter. “Look at you, growing a backbone all of a sudden!”

“I have figured a few things out.”

Like the fact that she had no friends, no allies. The fact that she had no place to go, no home to return to. The fact that she was completely on her own. Nevertheless, she had to stay alive. A life without friends, a life with no place to call her own, yes, it sucked being her. But if everyone in this world wanted her dead, then she wouldn’t die. And if no one in her old world wanted her back, then she’d go back anyway.

She wasn’t giving up. No way was she ever giving up. She was going to live. She was going to find Keiki. She was going home. It made no difference whether Keiki was friend or foe. If he was her enemy, even if he threatened her, she’d make him take her back.

“And what will you do when you get home?”

“I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it.”

“Better to just cash in your chips right now, no?”

“If no one gives a crap about me, then at least I’ll give a crap about myself.”

“That rat’s going to betray you.”

Youko turned and looked at the monkey. “If I don’t trust him, then he can’t betray me.”

It would have been better, of course, if she had figured this out earlier. She was a *kaikyaku*. That’s why she was hunted. A *kaikyaku* could count on no one. There was no place a *kaikyaku* could call safe ground. If she had understood even that much, she wouldn’t have been duped by Takki and Matsuyama. She wouldn’t have been so ready to trust and been so easily betrayed. When it came to staying alive, she would use the appearance of trust to get what she needed out of people. That was the better strategy to follow.

Take advantage of people who could be taken advantage of. It wasn’t the most ethical approach to life. Takki and Matsuyama had taken advantage of her to try and make themselves a little richer. She should have a few scruples then, about using Rakushun to keep body and soul together.

“You’re turning into quite the little scoundrel now, aren’t you?”

“Just doing what I have to do,” Youko muttered. She waved her hand dismissively. “I’m tired. Go away.”

A strange look came over the monkey’s face, an expression like a child stubbornly chomping down on a lemon. He turned his back to her and in a wink, sunk down into the futon and disappeared.

Watching this, Youko laughed thinly. These were all the anxieties she didn’t allow herself even to feel brought out in the open. It was proving a useful way to organize her thoughts, something she could take advantage of.

She laughed again, derisively. “Yes, I really am turning into quite the little scoundrel.”

Nevertheless, there was no way she’d allowed herself to be used by another person again. No way she’d willingly allow another person to harm her again. Come what may, she was going to protect herself.

“That’s why it’s got to be this way.”

The mother and child she’d met on the mountain road, they hadn’t betrayed her because she hadn’t given them the chance to betray her.

I won’t give Rakushun the chance, either.

And that is how she would stay alive.

But why had it been so necessary for her to come to this world? Why had Keiki called her “lord”? Who were her enemies? What was their goal? Why were they all after her? That woman—the one with the same golden hair as Keiki—who was she? Why had she done what she had done?

Youma are not the kind of creatures to go chasing after one person in particular.

Then why were they attacking *her*? That woman had embraced the corpse of the black dog as if mourning its death. Maybe they were comrades in arms. The same way Keiki gathered youma about him, so did she, and she had sent hers after Youko. Still, it looked like the woman was being ordered to attack her. Who was giving the orders? Was it Keiki or somebody else related to her?

She was clueless and she couldn’t afford to stay clueless. She had to find somebody who could answer her questions. Unconsciously, she clenched her hands into fists. Her fingernails dug into her palms. Youko held up her hands and examined the tips of her fingers.

Her chipped and broken nails were like knives, like some creature’s talons.

Only youma and wizards can cross the Kyokai (虚海).

Youko was neither a god nor a wizard.

That makes me a youma.

The dream of the red beast she had on the beach of the Kyokai—was it really a dream? Before coming to this world, for a long time she’d dreamt of being attacked by youma. That dream came true. Was her dream of becoming a youma also a premonition of things to come?

Her hair had turned red, her eyes green. Were these the first steps in a total transformation? Perhaps that meant she wasn’t a human being at all, but a youma. It struck her as a very frightening thought and at the same time, a rather pleasant one.

She could shout, scream, wave her sword about, threaten complete strangers, and all with a strange, hidden sense of euphoria. In the world she was born into, she had not once dared to raise her voice or give another person a cross look. To do so had always seemed like a sin. But wasn’t that because she had always known the truth? Wasn’t this all the result of pretending to live a “mostly harmless” life, when deep down in her subconscious, she knew she was a youma, knew she was a ferocious beast, knew she could not have gone on living in that other world?

Perhaps that was why everybody had described her as an unknown quantity, a closed book.

With these thoughts crowding her mind, she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 37

5-3 The house was the kind of small, poor-looking structure common in the rural districts. Even compared to those, Youko knew this dwelling was of a particularly wretched class.

The dwellings located out among the fields were usually grouped together into a village. It was unusual to see a house all by itself like this. There didn't appear to be any other houses nearby on the mountainside.

Think of a rat's house and she would have imagined something tiny. Although the overall scale was small, it was more or less a normal-sized structure. And not just the building. Youko couldn't help but marvel that from kitchen implements to daily necessities, everything was in human dimensions.

"Rakushun, do you have parents?" Youko asked.

She was filling a big kettle on the stove with water. She'd finally been able to get up and give Rakushun a hand around the house. She steadied the pail with her right hand, still wrapped with bandages. Beneath the bandages, the wound had almost completely healed.

Rakushun was restocking the stove with firewood. He looked up at her. "Don't have a father. My mom's out."

"Is she on a trip? It seems to be taking a long time. Has she gone far?"

"Not really. She went to the nearby village. She's got a job there. She was supposed to get back the day before yesterday."

Which meant that she would be getting back any day now. Youko made a mental note of this fact. "What does your mother do?"

"During the winter, she works as a maid. She's called on for odd jobs during the summer as well. Otherwise, she's a tenant farmer."

"Oh."

"So, Youko, where are you headed?"

Youko turned the question over in her mind. She wasn't really headed anyplace in particular. She didn't want to say she was just walking around. She said, "Have you ever heard of a guy named Keiki?"

Rakushun plucked a chip of wood out of his coat. "You're looking for somebody? Do you think he's from around here?"

"I don't know where he's from."

"Well, I'm sorry to say that I don't know anybody by the name of Keiki."

"Oh. Is there anything else you'd like me to do?"

"No, no, nothing else. You're still on the mend. You'd better sit down."

Youko lowered her tired body into the chair. The creaky old table and chairs sat on the bare earth floor of the small dining/kitchen area. The sword was on the chair next to her, wrapped in its shroud. She would not let it out of her sight for an instant, and Rakushun had not taken her to task over it. She had no idea what his thoughts on the matter were.

"So, tell me, Youko," Rakushun said in his childlike voice, the sleek, glossy coat of his back to her, "why are you pretending to be a boy?"

He would have figured that out when he changed her into the nightdress. She said, "It's dangerous for a girl traveling alone."

"That makes sense."

He brought over an earthenware teapot. Whatever he had brewed filled the small room with a rich aroma. He set two teacups on the table, raised his eyes to hers. "I was wondering why you didn't you have a scabbard for that sword?"

"I lost it."

As she answered, even now, she could remember losing the scabbard. When they crossed the Kyokai, she had been told to never separate the sword and scabbard. Yet no disaster had followed directly from losing it. Obviously, the intent of the admonition had been to preserve the jewels.

Rakushun mumbled something to himself and climbed onto the chair. The way he moved rather resembled a rat mimicking a human baby. "If you don't get yourself a scabbard for that thing, a person could really hurt himself."

"Yeah, a person could," Youko answered in a flat tone of voice.

Rakushun looked at her, his head tilted to the side. "You said you came from Hairou, right?"

"Yes."

"Hairou isn't in Kei. Isn't Hairou a village in the county of Shin (榎), along the eastern coast?"

If he says so, that must be where it is, Youko thought to herself blankly. She said nothing.

"It seems the place was thrown into quite a turmoil recently."

Youko continued to hold her tongue.

"A kaikyaku washed ashore and then ran away, something like that."

Youko scowled at him. Without giving it conscious thought, she reached for the sword. "What are you getting at?"

"A redheaded girl of sixteen or seventeen, last seen carrying a sword without a scabbard. Should be considered armed and dangerous." He paused and said, "You've dyed your hair, Youko."

Her attention focused on Rakushun, she grasped the hilt of the sword. She couldn't read the expression on his face. His countenance was too many degrees removed from the human.

"Well, at least that's what the local magistrate has been saying."

"The local magistrate . . ."

"Why the mortified expression? If I had intended to turn you in, I would have waited for the constables to show up. I hear there's a big reward on your head."

Youko unraveled the shroud from the sword. She stood and brandished the naked blade. "What do you want?"

The rat looked up at her with his jet-black eyes and quivered its silky whiskers. "You have quite the short temper."

"Why did you take me in?"

"Why did I take you in? Well, when I come across some poor chap dying along the wayside, I can't very well just leave him there. So I brought you home. I would think that taking care of you obviously means *not* turning you over to the authorities, don't you think?"

Youko couldn't bring herself to believe him. Simply trusting people like that, you were setting yourself up for a fall.

“All kaikyaku get sent to the county seat. If they’re good, they’re confined under house arrest. If they’re bad, then it’s the axe. If you were to ask me, I’d say you belonged to the latter group.”

“Why do you think that?”

“The word is, you’ve got some kind of black magic up your sleeves. You commanded the youma to attack the convoy and used the opportunity to make a break for it.”

“I didn’t command the youma to do anything.”

“That’s what I thought.” The rat nodded to himself. “I didn’t think it’d be so easy to order youma around like that. In fact, I don’t think it was you commanding the youma. I think it was *you* the youma were hunting.”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

“Well, either way, you must be a bad kaikyaku. Any person the youma would have it in for can’t be good.”

“And what if I am?”

“Nine times out of ten, when a kaikyaku ends up in front of the governor, that’s the last you hear of him. So naturally you’d run. But do you know where you should be running to?”

Youko had no answer.

“No, you have no idea at all. You simply stumbled into our little corner of the woods. Well, you should be headed for En (雁).”

Youko gave Rakushun a long, hard look. There was no expression on the rat’s face. She couldn’t read him at all.

“Why?”

“I guess I just can’t stand idly by and watch people get killed.” Rakushun laughed. “That doesn’t mean I’d shed a tear seeing some brigand go to the gallows. But executing a kaikyaku just because she’s a kaikyaku? No, that’s going too far.”

“But I’m a bad kaikyaku, aren’t I?”

“Well, the government seems to think so. But I suppose there are good kaikyaku and bad kaikyaku like everybody else. It’s a rare thing to know for sure which is which just by having a hunch about someone.”

“Bad kaikyaku bring calamities upon the kingdom.”

“Old wives’ tales.”

The quickness of his reply and the tone of his voice set off alarm bells in her head. It was exactly the same thing another person in this country had said. Though in that case, it was a human woman.

“So you’re saying that if I go to En, they’ll help me?”

“They will. The king of En gives sanctuary to kaikyaku. In En, kaikyaku can live their lives the same as everybody else, proof that it’s *people* that are good or bad, not kaikyaku. That’s why you should go to En. Now, why don’t you put that scary thing down?”

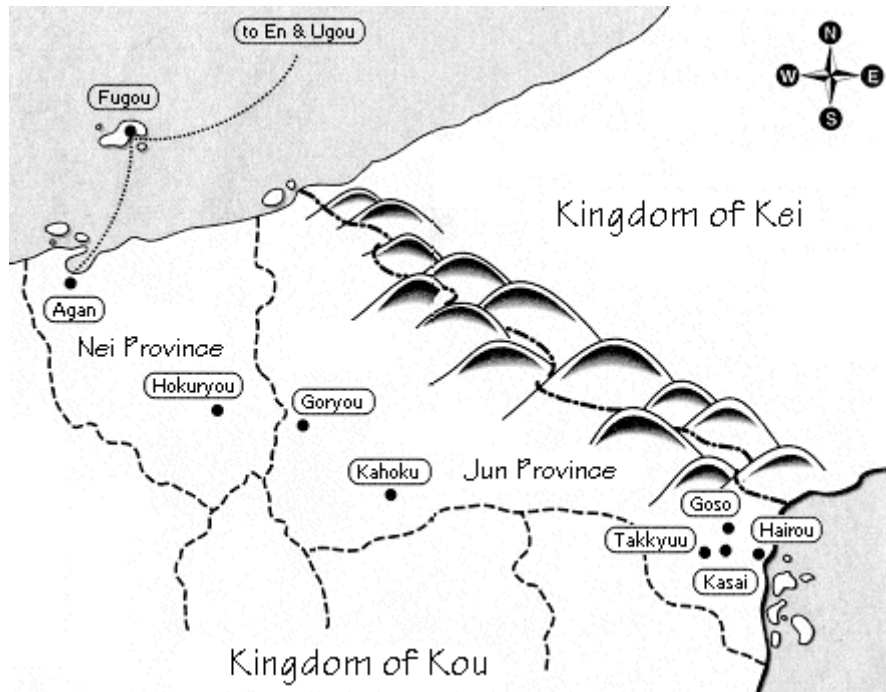
Youko hesitated several times, then lowered the sword.

“Pull up a chair. Your tea is getting cold.”

Youko sat herself down again. She had no idea what Rakushun was up to. Whenever her kaikyaku identity was exposed, it was best to get out of there as soon as possible. But she really wanted to know more about this En.

“Do you know the lay of the land around these parts?”

Youko shook her head. Rakushun nodded. Holding his teacup, he got down from the chair. He came over to where Youko was still holding the sword and leaned over the dirt floor.



“We are in An’you county (安陽縣) in Jun province (淳州), a region called Kahoku (鹿北),” Rakushun said, drawing a rough map in the dirt. “This is the Kyokai, and Shin county (楨縣) is here. Hairou is in this vicinity. That means you have been traveling in a westerly direction right into the interior of Kou (巧). If escaping was your goal—getting out of Kou—then you’ve been going in the wrong direction.”

Youko looked at the map with mixed emotions. Could she believe it? Could he be misleading her? Her doubts notwithstanding, she was starving for information. Right now, the desire for knowledge overcame her second thoughts.

“Bordering Jun on the west is Nei province (寧州). Following the main road, you’ll enter Hokuryou county (北梁縣). Further along the road, going in a northwestern direction, you’ll reach Agan (阿岸). It’s a big port city on the Blue Sea, the inner sea.

Rakushun sketched the rough map and wrote out the place names with a remarkably fine hand. “You can take a ship from Agan north across the Blue Sea. Your destination is En.”

Rakushun wrote “Enkoku” (雁國) as *The Kingdom of En*, using the Chinese character for “wild goose” (雁).

“It’d be a good idea to head first for Hokuryou before going on.”

But how would she get aboard a ship? If the port was guarded, it’d be like putting the noose around her own neck.

“You’ll be okay,” Rakushun laughed, as if reading her thoughts. “What I’m saying is, if a person in Shin wanted to escape Kou, the fastest way would be to head due north and

cross the mountains into Kei. The constables would never have expected you to take the route you've taken. Your getting lost may have been a blessing. The wanted posters describe a red-haired young girl. Do something about that big sword, and no one will know who you are."

"I see." Youko stood up. "Thank you," she said.

Rakushun looked up at her in surprise. "Hey, you're not thinking of leaving right away, are you?"

"Better sooner than later. I don't want to be a burden."

Rakushun jumped up. "Better later. You really are impatient, aren't you?"

"But . . ."

"After you get to the Kingdom of En, then what? Walk around grabbing people off the street and asking them if they know a guy named Keiki? Do you know how to book passage on a ship? How to petition for sanctuary in En?"

Youko looked away. Compared to her journey up till now, with only this new destination fixed in her mind, a considerably different future had opened up to her. Nevertheless, there would be more obstacles like this she would have to surmount. And these likely didn't amount to a tenth of what awaited her.

"You can't go rushing off without the slightest bit of preparation. If you don't prepare now, you'll be boxing yourself into a corner."

Youko nodded. There was still a part of her that feared falling into a trap, but on this point, she had no choice but to trust Rakushun.

"That's right. Have something to eat, put some meat on your bones. Even setting a quick pace, it will take a month to get to Agan."

Youko nodded again. At least until she got the better part of her strength back. That'd give her time to figure out what Rakushun was up to as well. Was he simply doing this out of the goodness of his heart, or was it part of some deeper stratagem? She had to get to Agan and then to En. But more than that, she had to first ascertain Rakushun's true intentions.

Chapter 38

5-4 Rakushun said as they were cleaning up after lunch, "I hear it was quite a big shoku (蝕)."

"That's what one of the elders of Hairou said."

"The news is that the wheat crops in the eastern region of Shin County were completely wiped out. It was a big tragedy."

Youko only nodded. Somewhere in her heart, she felt a twinge of guilt.

"I seem to have touched upon a sore spot. Not because you think it was your fault, I hope."

"It doesn't mean I'm all depressed about it," Youko said, scraping the ashes out of the stove.

The rat's furry tail reached over and rapped her lightly on the knuckles. "Shoku do not happen because kaikyaku show up. It's the shoku that bring the kaikyaku here."

Rakushun instructed her to deposit the ashes into a wooden box. The remaining embers were stored in another container.

Youko said, "Can I ask you something?"

"What's that?"

"What exactly is a shoku?" The elderwoman in Hairou had said it was something like a storm or tempest, but she still didn't understand its exact nature.

"Ah, so you don't know what a shoku is, either. You don't have shoku where you're from?"

"Well, it's written the same as an *eclipse* (蝕) of the sun or the moon. We have those."

"They're not dissimilar omens in some respects, except that the sun or moon don't disappear. So I guess you could say it's like a great tempest. A tempest throws the air into turmoil. A shoku throws the spirits into turmoil."

"But there's also wind and rain?"

"There can be wind and rain. There are shoku that blow through like a typhoon. They are rare. Earthquakes and thunder and rivers flowing backwards, sinkholes appearing out of nowhere, any kind of natural disaster you can think of, that's what a shoku is. In one part of Hairou, the ground beneath a lake rose up and all the water flooded out. The whole lake vanished off the map."

Youko washed her hands after dumping out the ashes. "Are they always so destructive?"

"It depends. We fear shoku far more than typhoons. You never know what will happen during a shoku."

"But why should such things happen?"

With a serious expression on his face, Rakushun set to making tea as if it were the most important thing in the world. "From what I've heard, a shoku is when *here* and *there* get tangled up together. When things that were originally apart come together and overlap each other, disasters follow. I don't really understand it myself, but that's what I think is going on."

"Here and there . . ."

The tea he made looked like green tea. The aroma was quite different. It resembled a herbal tea, with a quite soothing flavor.

"*There* is what lies beyond the Kyokai. *Here* is here. I can't think of any other name for it."

Youko nodded.

"The Kyokai encompasses the land. Beyond the land, the Kyokai goes on forever."

"Forever?"

"Forever, with no end in sight. And no end there ever will be, or so we are told. Explorers have sailed off in search of the end of the Kyokai. None have returned."

"So that means the earth really is flat."

Climbing onto his chair, Rakushun gave Youko a startled look. "But of course it is. It'd all be quite incomprehensible otherwise." There was surprise and laughter in his voice.

"Well, then, what shape does this world have?"

Rakushun picked up a walnut and placed it on the table. "In the middle of the world is *Suusan* (崇山)."

"Suusan?"

“The Supreme Mountain. It’s also called *Suukou* (崇高), the Pinnacle, or *Chuuзан* (中山), the Middle Mountain. Surrounding Suusan at the four cardinal points of the compass are the Eastern, Western, Southern and Northern Mountains. They are more commonly known as *Houzan* (蓬山), the Mountain of Wormwood; *Kazan* (華山), the Mountain of Splendor; *Kakuzan* (霍山), the Mountain of Immediacy; and *Kouzan* (恒山), the Mountain of Permanence. The story goes that the Eastern Mountain was formerly called Taishan (泰山). The ruler of the northern kingdom of Tai changed the spelling of his family name from the character meaning “generations” (代, Tai) to the character meaning “peaceful calm,” (泰, Tai) the same as Taishan. In deference to him, Taishan was changed to Houzan. Together they are called *Gozan* (五山), the Five Mountains.”

“No kidding.”

“Encompassing these five mountains is the Yellow Sea (黄海, Ou-kai). Though called a sea, it is not a body of water. Rather, it is said to be filled with craggy wastelands and deserts and swamps and an ocean of trees.”

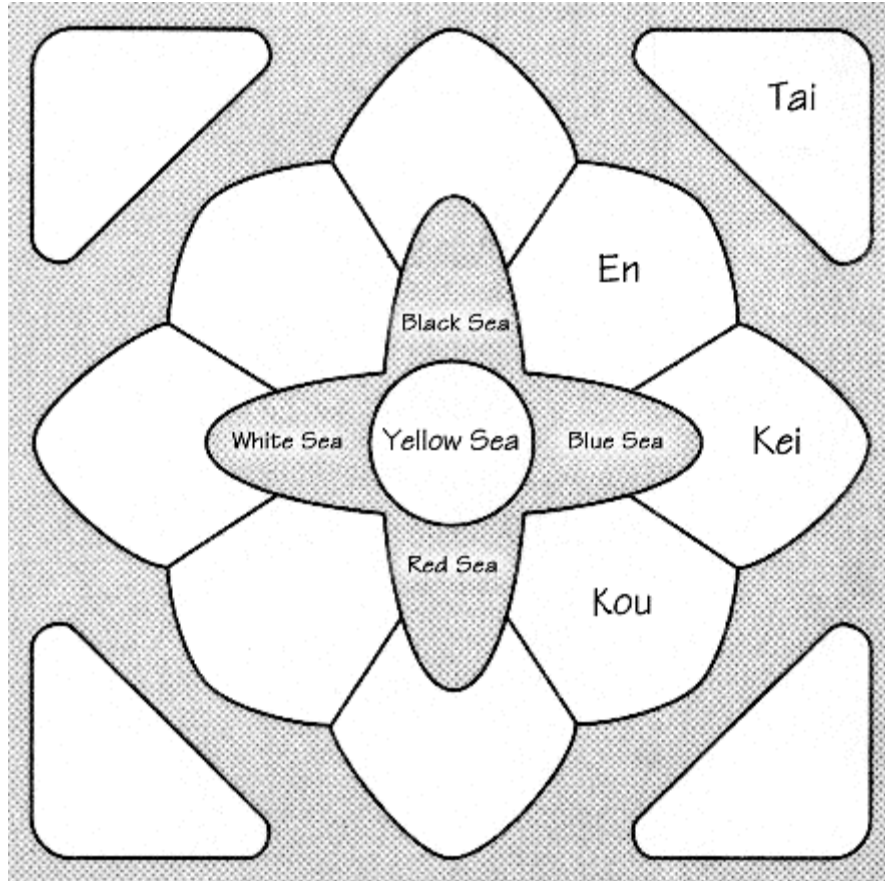
Youko paid close attention to the characters he was writing. “You’ve never seen it?”

“There’s no way I could. Encircling the Yellow Sea are the four *Kongouzan* (金剛山), the Adamantine Mountains. No mortal being can dwell within them.”

“Oh.” It really did look to her like an old map of some ancient world.

“The Adamantine Mountains are bordered by four seas. To the north, northeast, south, southwest, east, southeast, west, and northwest, eight countries encircle the seas. Beyond them is the Kyokai. Adjacent to these eight countries are four big islands. The four islands plus the eight countries that surround the Yellow Sea are the Twelve Kingdoms.”





Youko examined the geometric arrangements of walnuts. It looked like a flower, the kingdoms arrayed about the Gozan like petals.

“And there’s nothing else?”

“Nothing else. Only the Kyokai reaching out to the very end of the world.” *But*, he seemed to say to himself and added, “Tales have been told of an island far away at the eastern edge of the world, fairy tales about a place called the Kingdom of Hourai (蓬莱). Also known as Japan.”

The character he wrote down was *Wa* (倭), the ancient name for Yamato (倭).

“Really? The same ‘Yamato’ as Japan?”

When she wrote out the character herself, it definitely was Yamato. Youko bit her lip. Was it because of how the language was translated?

“It’s also said that Yamato is where kaikyaku come from.”

This time she clearly heard “Yamato.” Because she knew the word as well in her native language, she didn’t need it translated for her.

“It all might be tall tales, but when you listen to what the kaikyaku say, it seems that there is undoubtedly a country called Yamato. Ships have sailed off in search of Yamato. They too have never returned.”

If indeed Japan did exist at the furthest reaches of the Kyokai, it might be possible to reach it by sailing east. But Youko knew the chances of that were slim. The only way home was through the shadow of the moon.

“There’s also a legend that says that deep within the Adamantine Mountains is a place called Kunlun (崑崙). Beyond Kunlun is China. China is the home of the *zankyaku* (山客), the visitors (客, *kyaku*) from across the mountains (山, *san* or *zan*).” Rakushun wrote down the character for Han (漢) to represent China.

“Zankyaku? You mean there are other people who get tangled up in this place, not just kaikyaku?”

“That’s right. Kaikyaku wash up on the shores of the Kyokai. Zankyaku are found wandering at the foot of the Adamantine Mountains. There aren’t a lot of zankyaku in this kingdom, though. Kaikyaku or zankyaku, you’ve got to run for your life.”

“Figures.”

“Han or Yamato, normal people just can’t come and go. Only youma and the mountain wizards can. When there is a shoku, people from over there are caught up in the currents. Those people are the zankyaku and kaikyaku.”

“Huh.”

“The people of Yamato and Han, it’s said that they live in houses made of gold and silver, studded with jewels. Their kingdoms are so wealthy that farmers live like kings. They gallop through the air and can run a thousand miles in a single day. Even babies have the power to defeat youma. Youma and wizards have supernatural powers because they travel to those other worlds and drink from magical springs deep within the mountains.”

Rakushun looked at Youko expectantly. Youko shook her head with a rueful smile. What a strange conversation this was. If she ever returned to her old world, they would never believe her. Fairly tales, they would say. And here, her world was a fairy tale as well. She laughed to herself. All along she had believed that this was a strange and mysterious world. But in the end, wasn’t she and the place she came from even more so?

That must be why, she concluded at length, kaikyaku were hunted down like dogs.

Chapter 39

5-5 For a long, empty moment, Youko thought about the past and the fate of so many kaikyaku. She said, “The kaikyaku who end up here are killed because everybody automatically associates kaikyaku with shoku.”

“That’s what it has come to, I guess. What’s your occupation, Youko?”

“I’m a student.”

“Yes, yes,” Rakushun said excitedly. “There are kaikyaku who possess skills that we do not, who know things that we do not. They can survive with the protection of powerful patrons.”

But of course, Youko thought, an ironic smile coming to her lips. She didn’t know anything worth anything in this world. She said, “Do you know of any way of returning to Yamato?”

In response to her question, a frown came clearly to his face. “I don’t.” He hesitated, then added, “Perhaps I shouldn’t say this, but I don’t think there is a way.”

“That can’t be true. If I *came* here, then there’s got to be a way for me to *leave* here.”

At the tone of Youko’s voice, Rakushun’s whiskers drooped. “No mortal being can cross the Kyokai, Youko.”

“But *I* crossed the Kyokai. That’s how I got here in the first place.”

“Even if you were able to arrive here, there’s no way to leave. I have never heard of a *kaikyaku* or *zankyaku* returning to his home country.”

“That can’t be right.” She simply could not accept that it was not possible. “What about another *shoku*? I could wait for another *shoku* and get home the same way I came.”

In response to Youko’s spirited objections, Rakushun only sadly shook his head. “Nobody knows when and where a *shoku* might occur. And even if you did, there’s no way a mortal being could travel to that other world.”

No, that can’t be true, Youko again fervently told herself. If she couldn’t go home, then Keiki would have told her so. He hadn’t said a thing about it. She’d sensed nothing in his attitude or manner that suggested that it was a one-way trip.

“But I fled from Yamato to get away from the *kochou* (蠱彫).”

“A *kochou*? You escaped a *kochou* and came here?”

“That’s right. With a man named Keiki.”

“And he’s the person you’re looking for?”

“Yes. This guy named Keiki, he brought me here. To tell the truth, it was because the *kochou* and the rest of them were hunting me. He said that in order to protect me, I had to come here.” She looked at Rakushun. “By which I took it to mean that once I was safe, I could go back. That makes sense, doesn’t it? He said that if I really wanted to go home, he would take me.”

“Nonsense.”

“Keiki had these creatures with him who could soar through the air. Animals who could talk, like you. As the crow flies, it was a one-day trip, that’s what he said. It’s not the kind of thing you’d say if you were going on a journey where there’d be no coming back, right?”

Youko spoke as if pleading her case to a judge. For a while, Rakushun said nothing.

“Rakushun?”

“I really don’t know. But I’d say that something quite important is going on.”

“It’s that big a deal, just based on what I told you?”

“A very big deal. If a *youma* like a *kochou* showed up around here, it’d be a very big deal. Every town within shouting distance would empty out. And you’re talking about a *kochou* going after one person, and going as far as that other world. This is the first time I’ve ever heard of such a thing. And then a man called Keiki brought you here?”

“That’s right.”

“It’s said that *youma* and wizards and their kith and kin can take themselves back and forth. As for this Keiki person, no matter what kind a being he is, taking somebody *else* along with him? That’s a new one in my book. Whatever happened, I don’t think I’m the one to figure it out. But I know this much: it’s definitely *not* the kind of thing that happens on a regular basis.”

After pondering the matter for a while, Rakushun looked at Youko with his jet-black eyes. “So, as things stand now, what do you want to do? Keep yourself safe at all costs? Or go home?”

“I want to go home.”

Rakushun nodded. “As I expected. But that’s not something I know how to do. In any case, I think you ought to go to En.”

“I agree. And after that?”

“You can’t expect much help from government officials or the province lords. I think your best bet would be to go to En and ask for help directly from the Royal En (延王, En Ou).”

Youko stared in amazement at the characters Rakushun was writing. “The Royal En? You mean the king?”

Rakushun nodded. “The Kingdom of En has been ruled for generations by a king known as the *En*.”

“But is a king going to bother to help me?”

“I don’t know.”

You’ve got to be kidding! Youko wanted to shout, but held her tongue.

“What I do know is that it’s better than staying here in Kou. At least better odds than beseeching the emperor of Kou. Perhaps it’s because the Royal En is a *taika* (胎果).”

“A *taika*?”

“*The fruit of the womb*, it means. Born the same way as they are in that other world. It’s really rare here. You have to wonder if, in fact, he’s not one of us at all, but was born over there.”

Youko’s eyes opened wide. “What are you talking about?”

“It really is rare. Though perhaps I’m mistaken. It might be equally rare over there as well, or rare that anyone over there would return here. It’s hard to know which.”

“Huh.”

“There are three well-known *taika*: the Royal En of the En Kingdom, the *Saiho* (幸輔) of En, and the *Saiho* of the Tai Kingdom.”

“*Saiho*?”

“A counselor or advisor to the king. There’s talk that the Tai-*saiho* has died. The whereabouts of the Tai king are unknown. The kingdom is in turmoil and nobody wants to go anywhere near the place. You really ought to make En your destination.”

Youko found herself a bit overcome, partly because her brain was suddenly crammed with so much new information, and partly because all at once, a whole new view of things had appeared before her.

Going to visit the king, that was the kind of thing prime ministers and presidents did. Was it even possible? At the same time, the prospect of becoming caught up in such weighty matters left her lightheaded and confused.

As she turned all this over in her head, she heard the sound of footsteps outside.

Chapter 40

5-6 The front door opened, revealing the figure of a middle-age woman. “Rakushun,” she said.

The rat raised his head. “Hi, Mom.” He quivered his whiskers nervously. “I picked up a most interesting house guest.”

Youko couldn’t help but gawk. This person was definitely a woman and definitely a human. The woman looked back and forth between Youko and Rakushun, a surprised expression on her face. “A guest, you say. And just who is this young lady?”

“I found her in the forest. She washed ashore in Shin County during that recent *shoku*.”

You don't say, the woman muttered to herself, giving Rakushun a stern look.

Youko drew back her shoulders. Had this woman heard the rumors of a kaikyaku who'd escaped from Shin? And if she had, would she give her shelter as Rakushun had?

"Yes, it was quite terrible." The woman turned to Youko, who was holding her breath in anticipation. She smiled, glanced back at Rakushun. "What in the world have you been up to? It's a good thing I decided to check in on you. Have you been taking good care of her?"

"I certainly have."

"Well, let's hope so." Laughing, the woman looked at Youko with bright eyes. "Sorry I couldn't be here. I had some tasks to attend to. I hope Rakushun has done a good job tending to your needs."

"Um . . . yes." Youko nodded. "I had a bad fever and could hardly move on my own. He was a great help. I'm very thankful."

Heavens! the woman's expression said. She hurried over to Youko. "Are you all right? Should you be up and about?"

"I'm fine. I really was well taken care of."

As she answered, Youko searched the woman's face. She was okay with Rakushun because he wasn't human. But she couldn't be sure about this person.

"That being the case, all the more reason for coming and getting me. He doesn't always use his head."

Rakushun lifted his nose with a put-out air. "I did take good care of her. See, she's healed up just fine."

The woman peered at Youko's face. "Healed up fine, you say? Anything still hurt? Perhaps you ought to go back to bed."

"I am feeling better. Really."

"So it seems. But what are you wearing this flimsy old thing for? Rakushun, get her a kimono."

Rakushun ran into the other room.

"Oh, the tea's gone cold. Wait a minute and I'll brew up a fresh pot."

Youko watched as the woman firmly closed the front door, bustled past her and went out the back door to the well. When Rakushun returned, carrying a kimono that resembled a light overcoat, she whispered to him, "Your mom?"

"Yes. My dad passed away a long time ago."

She couldn't help wondering if his father was a human or a rat. "Your *real* mom?" she asked cautiously.

Rakushun responded with a puzzled look. "Of course she's my real mom. She's the one who picked me."

"Picked you?"

Rakushun nodded. "She picked me—the fruit that held me—from the *riboku* (里木), the family tree." He stopped suddenly, as if something had just occurred to him. "Is it true that in that other world, a child grows inside his mother's stomach?"

"Ah, yes. That's the normal way of things."

"The fruit grows inside her stomach? But how do you pick it then? Does it hang down from her belly?"

"I'm not quite sure what you mean by *pick*."

"You take the *ranka* (卵果) from the tree."

“The ranka?”

“The egg-fruit. About this big around.” He opened his arms as if carrying a basket. “It’s a yellow fruit. Inside is a child. It grows on a branch of a riboku. The parents come and pick one. Don’t egg-fruits grow over there?”

“Well, not quite.” Youko pressed her hands to her temples. What ought to be common sense here clearly wasn’t. Rakushun looked at her expectantly. Youko smiled to cover her self-consciousness. She said, “Over there, a child forms in his mother’s belly. His mother gives birth to him.”

Rakushun’s eyes grew wide. “Like a chicken?”

“Not quite, but that’s the general idea.”

“How does it work then? Is there a branch inside her stomach? How do you pick the fruit when it’s inside her stomach?”

“Oh, God . . .”

Youko was holding her head in her hands when Rakushun’s mother returned. “Tea’s ready,” she said. “You hungry?”

As Rakushun caught her up to date about Youko, his mother nimbly prepared some scone-like pastries.

“And then,” said Rakushun, breaking the big scone into pieces with his little hands, “we were thinking that the best course of action might be to go to En and check out things there.”

His mother nodded. “Yes, indeed. I would agree.”

“With that in mind, I’ll take her as far as Kankyuu (関弓). We’ll need to get her some clothes to take with her.”

His mother looked Rakushun in the eyes. She said brusksly, “You’re going to do what?”

“There’s nothing to worry about. I’ll be there and back before you know it! She doesn’t know where anything is, so I’ll show her the way. You’re being too overprotective. I’ll be fine on my own.”

His mother gave Rakushun a long look, then nodded. “Well, all right, then. You be careful, though.”

“Rakushun,” Youko interjected. “I appreciate your concern for me, but I don’t want to cause you any more trouble. Once you show me the way, I’m sure I can figure things out.”

She couldn’t bring herself to say that she found the prospect of a traveling companion quite alarming. “I don’t want to impose on you, but you could draw me a map like you were showing me before.”

“Youko, if it were simply a matter of getting to En, *assuming* that you’d then be in a position to petition the king, you could never do it on your own. Even knowing the way, it will take at least three months to get to the palace in Kankyuu. In the meantime, what will you eat? Where will you stay? How will you pay for anything?”

Youko couldn’t answer.

“This is *not* a journey you want to take by yourself. You said it yourself, you don’t know anything about this world.”

Youko thought about it. After thinking it through for a while, she said, “All right.”

As she spoke, out of the corners of her eyes, she caught sight of the shrouded sword. Perhaps it would be better to have Rakushun along for the journey. Both he and his mother seemed ready to give her what help they could, though that wasn't necessarily the real truth. Whether friend or foe, she couldn't know for certain. But as long as they knew where she was going, she couldn't afford to take chances. If the authorities were quickly informed as soon as she left, what awaited her in Agan would not be a ship, but a cage.

If Rakushun accompanied her, however, he'd essentially become her hostage. And if by chance he proved an unacceptable risk, her sword would settle the question.

Thinking this, she was struck by the feeling that she truly had become a pathetic creature.

Chapter 41

5-7 Five days had passed since she had set off with Rakushun. At least he and his mother had treated her like they were sympathetic to her plight, and that gave her time to rest and recuperate.

"You have no idea what the two of them have up their sleeves," the blue monkey lectured her. This was hardly news to her.

Rakushun's mom made all the preparations for their journey. Despite subsisting on an even more meager income than Takki, she was able to put together a change of clothes for Youko. The clothing was rough and plain and seemed made originally for a larger man. Youko guessed they had belonged to Rakushun's father.

It only made Youko more wary. She could not believe they were simply a pair of good Samaritans. She was still okay with Rakushun because of his non-human form. She didn't have the courage to trust his mother completely.

"Why are you doing so much to help me?" she asked. They had left Rakushun's home and the dwelling had finally disappeared from view. She couldn't bear not knowing any longer.

Rakushun stroked his whiskers with his small forefeet. "Well, it's because you were all alone, and we have to get you to Kankyuu."

"Don't you think that giving me the directions would have been enough?"

"What are you talking about? The sights in Kankyuu aren't half bad, or so I've heard. A most interesting place. It's like that other world, probably because that's where the king is from."

"Like Yamato or like China?"

"Like Yamato. The Royal En came from Yamato."

"And that's your only reason?"

Rakushun looked up at Youko. "You still don't trust me, do you, Youko?"

"And perhaps you've been overdoing it a bit?"

The rat was carrying a knapsack on his back. He scratched the fur on his chest. "Well, look at me. I'm a *hanjuu* (半獣)."

"A hanjuu?"

"A half-beast, a chimera. The Royal Kou doesn't like hanjuu, either. He hates kaikyaku, hates anything that is *different*."

Youko nodded.

“There aren’t a lot of kaikyaku in Kou. Most kaikyaku wash ashore in the eastern kingdoms. But when I say, ‘most,’ in fact their actual numbers aren’t that great.”

“About how many?”

“I’d say one shows up every couple years or so.”

“Huh,” said Youko. Even that was more than she would have imagined.

“At any rate, the greatest number of kaikyaku are found in Kei, perhaps because Kei is the easternmost of the kingdoms. After that, En and then Kou. There aren’t many hanjuu in Kou. I couldn’t tell you why or to what degree.”

“Are there many in the other kingdoms?”

“More than there are in Kou. I’m the only hanjuu around these parts. The king isn’t a bad person, but he does have his prejudices. He deals severely with kaikyaku and keeps his distance from hanjuu like me.” Rakushun gave his whiskers a twitch. “I don’t mean to boast, but I am the sharpest apple in the barrel around here.”

Unable to grasp the intent of this statement, Youko just looked at him.

“Not to mention intelligent, quick-witted, and fairly even-tempered.”

Youko laughed politely. “Of course you are.”

“Yet all that won’t make me a full-fledged human being. No matter how much time passes, I’ll always be half a man. Because I’ll never be anything more than half-human. It was set in stone when I was born in this form. Not being able to do anything about it doesn’t make it my fault.”

Youko replied with a slight nod. Though she vaguely understood what he was getting at, it didn’t assuage any of her misgivings.

“A kaikyaku is the same. Killing a kaikyaku for being a kaikyaku is not something I can condone.”

“Indeed.”

Rakushun scratched the bottoms of his big ears. “Do you know what a *joushou* (上摩) is? It’s a district academy. I was first in my class and was recommended by the dean to the provincial university. If I had gone to university, I could have become a local government official.”

“Is a district bigger than a county?”

“Bigger than a prefecture. There are a handful of districts in a province. How many’s a handful depends, though. Each district has a population of fifty thousand households. Each district has four prefectures with a population of twelve thousand, five hundred. There are five counties to a prefecture.”

“Huh.” She had a hard time wrapping her head around a number like fifty thousand.

“In fact, I only made it to the district academy after my mom petitioned over and over, and she was finally able to get me admitted. If my grades were good, I knew I could go to the university and become a government official. Because I’m half-human, I won’t get an allotment. But even without an allotment, I could make a decent life for myself. As it turns out, though, hanjuu aren’t allowed into the provincial university.”

“Oh.”

“In order to pay my tuition to the district academy, my mom ended up selling her own allotment.”

“And now?”

“And now she’s a tenant farmer. She farms land rented from one of the richer homesteads in the area.”

“Homestead?”

“Homesteads are granted by the executor for public lands. After getting permission from the government, the newly cultivated land is called a homestead. Still, my mom can work the land, but not me. People don’t hire out hanjuu. The taxes are too high.”

Youko tilted her head to one side. “Why’s that?”

“Among the hanjuu, there are also those of us who resemble bears or cows. They are more powerful than ordinary humans. But what it comes down to is, the king doesn’t like hanjuu. That’s all.”

“Yeah, that really sucks.”

“He doesn’t hate us as much as kaikyaku. I can’t say we’re arrested or executed or things like that. But we’re not counted as part of the official census. That’s why we’re not given allotments or jobs. My mom has to provide for both of us. That’s why we’re so poor.”

“Oh.”

“I’d really like to get a job.” Rakushun gestured to the purse hanging around his neck. “This is all the money my mom saved up so that I could pay the tuition at a university in En. In En, even hanjuu are admitted to the best universities in the country and become important statesmen. I’d be recognized as a legal adult, given an allotment and included in the census. I thought that if I went to En with you, I could get myself a job too.”

So it wasn’t all out of the kindness of his heart, Youko thought cynically. There was no malice in it, but this was no altruistic act, either.

“Yes, it all makes perfect sense.”

There was a barb in her voice that made Rakushun stop and look at Youko for a moment. But he kept his thoughts to himself.

Youko said nothing more after that. Everybody keeps their own welfare first and foremost in mind. Question an act of charity deeply enough and you’ll discover a kernel of selfishness in it. That’s why she begrudged nothing Rakushun had said.

Of course, Youko thought. That’s why we betray one another. In the end, we’re only out for number one. It doesn’t matter who you are, nobody can live with another person’s welfare solely in mind.

Chapter 42

5-8 That evening, they arrived at a city called Kakuraku (郭洛), a city as big as Kasai (河西).

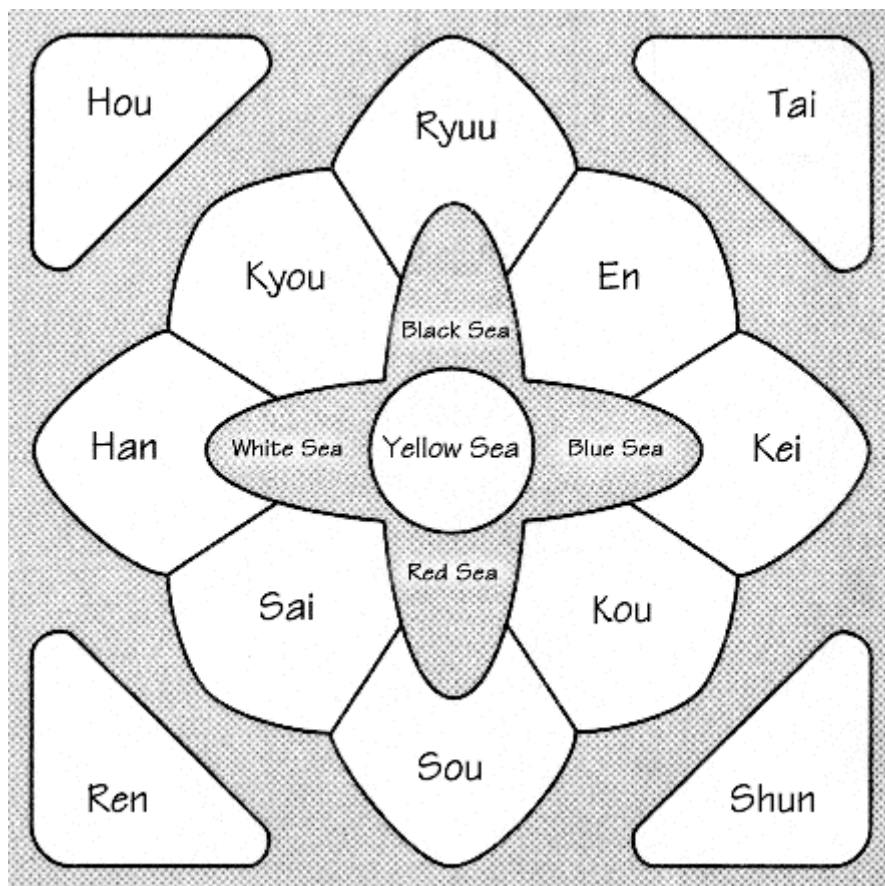
Youko had traveled with a person from this world before, but compared to then, they were on a much tighter budget. They ate dinner at a roadside stand and spent the night in the cheapest inn. A single night costs fifty sen (錢), and for that, you got a bed in a big room sectioned off with folding screens. Because Rakushun was picking up the tab, Youko was in no position to complain.

Rakushun passed off Youko as his younger brother. If nobody had a problem with him having a human mother, they shouldn’t have a problem with him having a human brother. And, in fact, no one gave them so much as a second glance.

It was at first an uneventful journey. As they walked along, Rakushun helpfully explained things. “The Twelve Kingdoms are made up of four Great Realms (大国, *Taikoku*), four Principalities (州国, *Shuukoku*), and four Outlands (極国, *Kyokukoku*).”

“Four Great Realms?” Youko glanced over her shoulder at Rakushun, tottering along beside her.

“That’s right. The four Great Realms are the Eastern Kingdom of Kei (慶), the Southern Kingdom of Sou (奏), the Western Kingdom of Han (範), and the Northern Kingdom of Ryuu (柳). The Great Realms are not particularly bigger than the Principalities, but that’s what they’re called. The Principalities are En Shuukoku (雁州国), Kyou Shuukoku (恭州国), Sai Shuukoku (才州国), and Kou Shuukoku (舜州国). The four Outlands are Tai (戴), Shun (舜), Hou (芳), and Ren (漣).”



“In other words, Tai Kyokukoku, Shun Kyokukoku, Hou Kyokukoku and Ren Kyokukoku?”

“Correct. Each is ruled by a king. The Royal Kou is known as the Mountain King. His palace is in Gousou (傲霜), in Ki Province (喜州). It is called *Suikou* (翠篁), the Palace of Green Bamboo.”

“Gousou is a city?”

Nodding, Rakushun pointed off to the left at the mountains coming into view. The land was very hilly here. In the distance, she could see a rising line of foothills, and beyond, dimly visible, an even more formidable range of towering mountains.

“In that direction, far beyond those mountains is a mountain that reaches up to heaven. Mount Gousou. At its peak is Suikou, the Palace of Green Bamboo. Around the foot of the mountain is the city of Gousou.”

“No kidding.”

“From there, the king rules the country. He appoints the province lords, promulgates laws, and allocates public lands to the people.”

“What do the province lords do then?”

“The province lords are the *de facto* rulers of each province. They are responsible for the disposition of provincial lands, the welfare of the citizenry, and the conduct of the military. They formalize and execute the laws, conduct the census, collect taxes, and mobilize the troops in times of emergency.”

“It sounds to me like the king isn’t the person who’s really running things.”

“It is the job of the king to provide the guidelines for the administration of the government.”

She didn’t really understand it, but perhaps it was like the federal system in the United States.

“The king lays down what is known as the Law of the Land. The province lords can also legislate but they cannot go against the Law of the Land. And neither can the Law of the Land violate the Divine Decrees.”

“The Divine Decrees?”

“The Divine Decrees are handed down to the sovereign, declaring how a kingdom must be ruled. If you think of this world as broad pavilion, the Decrees are the pillars that hold it up. They’re also known as the Pillars of Heaven, or the Great Colonnade. Even kings bow to their authority. As long as a king does not tread upon the Great Colonnade, he may rule his kingdom as he sees fit.”

“Huh. So who decided what this Great Colonnade was? You’re not telling me it’s some sort of God, are you?”

Well, Rakushun chuckled. “The story is that a long, long time ago, *Tentei* (天帝)—the Lord God of the Heavens, the Divine Creator—destroyed the Nine Dominions and the Four Barbarian Domains that comprised the Thirteen Realms. Five gods and twelve mortals were spared, and all the rest of humanity were returned to their eggs. In the center of the world, five mountains were created and presided over by *Seioubo* (西王母), the Royal Mother of the West. The realm encircling the five mountains was transformed into the Yellow Sea. The five gods were appointed the Dragon Kings of the Five Seas.

“A creation myth, in other words.”

“So it is. Each of the remaining twelve was given a branch of a tree. Around each branch was wrapped a snake, and each branch bore three fruits. The snakes unwound themselves from each branch and lifted the sky to the heavens. The fruits fell down creating, in turn, the earth, a kingdom, and a throne. Then each of the branches turned into a calligraphy brush.”

This was a creation myth different from any Youko had heard of.

“The snakes are the pillars of the Great Colonnade, the earth represents the census, the kingdoms stand for the law, the thrones symbolize justice and virtue, or the *Saiho*,



and the brush records the history of the people.” Rakushun twitched his whiskers. “At that time, none of us had been born, so nobody knows how true it really is.”

“Naturally.” When she was a lot younger, she’d read about Chinese creation myths in a children’s book. She remembered none of it now. Even so, she had a hard time believing there could be any similarities. “I take it this Tentei is the head God?”

“I guess you could put it that way.”

“So if you’re going to pray to anybody, Tentei is the guy to pray to?”

Pray to? Rakushun seemed to say, tilting his head to the side. “Well, if you were praying for a child, yes, you would petition the Tentei.”

“Other than that? What about praying for wealth and prosperity?”

“If you were asking for wealth and prosperity, you’d petition *Gyoutei* (饒帝), the August God. Speaking of which, there are sects that worship Gyoutei. And in that same vein, to escape floods, there are those who look to *Utei* (禹帝). To escape youma, there’s *Koutei* (黃帝).”

“So there are all kinds?”

“Yes, and there are religions that worship all of them too.”

“But it’s not something people normally do?”

“No need to. If the weather is good to us, the harvest will be bountiful. Whether the weather is good or bad depends on the conditions of the heavens. The rain falls on the happy and the sad, on the just and the unjust alike. When it doesn’t, there’s a drought. Praying about it won’t do any good.”

Youko was taken aback by this. “Yeah, but if there’s a flood, isn’t that going to cause problems for everybody?”

“In order to prevent floods, the king orders that dikes and dams be built.”

“Or, say, frost damage?”

“So there won’t be famine at such times, wouldn’t it be up to the king to manage the distribution of food?”

I don’t get this at all. What she did get was that these people weren’t like the people she knew at all. “So what you’re saying is, nobody says prayers to pass a test, or save money, or stuff like that.”

It was Rakushun’s turn to look surprised. “Don’t things like that all depend on the effort of the individual involved? How would you go about praying for them?”

“Well, yeah, but”

“If you study for a test, then you’ll pass. If you work hard, you’ll earn money. What exactly is praying about it supposed to accomplish?”

So that’s what this is all about. Youko laughed cynically to herself. Nobody crosses their fingers, nobody makes promises to God. So if you’ve got the chance to sell a kaikyaku into slavery, make yourself a little on the side, hey, what’s the problem? Waste not, want not.

“Yeah, I guess it figures,” she muttered, but there was a coldness in her words that made Rakushun look up at her and made his whiskers droop in disappointment.

It was something he usually boasted of only to himself, but Rakushun was well-studied and had an unusually sharp mind. He found it painful to think that despite this, he should become a burden on his mother, and only because he was a half-human hanjuu.

Rakushun wanted to ask more about Youko and about Japan, but she had nothing more to say.

And so it was, on the sixteenth day of their journey, that the attack came.

Chapter 43

5-9 Evening approached. Goryou (午寮), the city they planned to stay in that night, had just come into view.

The travelers moving hastily along the highway had created a crush of people in front of the gates. Youko found herself caught up with them and quickened her pace. It was about five hundred yards to the gates. As if to hurry them along, from within the walls a big drum began pounding. When the drum stopped sounding, the gates would close. Everybody started running. This only added to the throngs jammed up at the gates. Then amongst the crowds, somebody started yelling.

As if drawn along by the voice, a person, then two, then more looked back and up at the sky. Here and there, the crowd came to a standstill. Noting this with great suspicion, Youko glanced back over her shoulder. Already she could clearly see the silhouette of a great bird. A great bird like an eagle with a horn. And there were eight more of them.

“Kochou!”

The screams reverberated, a wave of humanity rushed toward Goryou. Youko and Rakushun took off at a sprint, but it was obvious that the kochou would get there ahead of them.

With total disregard to the flood of people, the huge gates began to close.

Idiots.

They certainly had the right to defend themselves against the kochou, but even if there were nobody else but those inside the gates, what good would closing the gates do against these flying monsters?

“Wait . . . !”

“Wait, please!”

The cries echoed out around them. Youko suddenly pushed Rakushun away from the crowds. They were fortunately still a good distance from the gates. Had they been alone at the gates, they would have been trampled and crushed by the onslaught of people pushing and clawing their way through. It looked like some inner circle of hell.

Putting distance between her and the human tidal wave, Youko ran toward the city. She permitted herself a hollow laugh.

This is a country that asks nothing of God.

Even being attacked by youma, they expected nothing from their Gods. So they thought nothing of tearing down the people in front of them to get there faster. Yet the gates closed on the travelers, as if they weren't there. Whether or not you were being attacked by youma, wasn't it up to you to keep on your toes? And whether you were rescued or not, weren't you supposed to rely on your own devices?

“The fools,” she said aloud. This bunch couldn't be more powerless.

That sound grew nearer, like the wails of a crying baby. Youko stopped on the spot. Running along next to her, Rakushun looked back over his shoulder and shouted, “No, Youko, it’s pointless! We won’t make it!”

“You keep heading toward the city!”

The circling kochou was now close enough that she could see the spots on his breast. Glaring at it, she again motioned Rakushun toward the gate. She undid the shroud wrapped around the sword. That familiar sensation crawled along her skin. She was used to Jouyuu’s touch by now and did not find it unpleasant at all. A smile came to her lips.

It’s not pointless.

The kochou were taking their time. There were only eight of them, and her sword would easily pierce their fat flesh. All a bigger foe meant was a bigger target. At the intervals they were gliding in, it would be easy enough to pick them off.

It’d been a while since she’d gone toe-to-toe with her enemies. Her gleeful self was looking forward to it. Her wounds had healed, she had energy to spare, and no doubts about defeating them. Hearing the cries of the people who could do nothing but run—many of whom would otherwise be hunting *her*—sent a strange thrill up her spine.

A rancid smell was in the wind. She prepared herself as the flock of kochou dove toward her. The blood boiled in her veins, the sound of raging seas roared in her ears.

I am an animal, a beast. No doubt about it, I am a youma.

That’s why meeting her enemies on the field of battle was such a great joy.

The slaughter began. The slaughter of kochou, the slaughter of humans.

She felled the first one that came at her, and the second. By the time she had four down and four to go, the road was a river of blood. The fifth dropped on her like a crashing plane. She cut off its head, dodged the sixth. The sixth grazed her with its talons, tore through a bunch of travelers behind her and rose back into the sky.

Youko stood her ground and did her job. She’d long ago become used to the scent of blood, to the sensation of severing flesh and bone. The sight of dead bodies no longer aroused within her any sensitive feelings. To parry and kill, to draw blood and retreat, when it came down to it, that was all she cared about

She struck down the seventh and looked up at the sky. The eighth kochou was maintaining altitude, turning circles high in the air, as if confused about what to do next. The falling dusk turned the sky to the color of rust. The dark shadow of the youma bird passed by overhead. No matter what powers Jouyuu gave her, she could not chase a kochou into the sky.

“Come on down,” Youko muttered to herself. Come into the reach of *my* claws.

As she stared up at the wheeling shadow, she also searched the landscape out of the corners of her eyes. Her foes had appeared in the light of day. And that meant that the woman, the golden-haired woman, had to be around somewhere.

If she was anywhere nearby, Youko would grab her. She could do that now. She’d grab her and find out what she was up to. And if the woman didn’t have anything to say, Youko was pretty sure lopping off an arm would get her into a talking mood.

As she turned the possibilities over in her mind, a surprising thought occurred to her. Perhaps she was catching a glimpse into the character of these beasts, some method behind the madness. Or perhaps the kochou was simply intoxicated from so much blood.

The shadow overhead suddenly changed the angle of its movements. *Here it comes.* Youko regripped the sword and strengthened her hold on the hilt. But in the moment she raised the sword, the bird corrected its course and once again climbed vigorously into the sky.

“C’mon!” she yelled. “Bring it on!”

Does a youma hold its own life as precious? They’d had no problem attacking people up till today! Youko flipped the sword around and sank it into the corpse of the kochou at her feet. “You don’t come at me!” she shouted, fully intending her words to be understood, “I’ll cut your buddy here to pieces! How’s them apples, huh?”

The wheeling kochou suddenly plunged earthward, streaking toward her like an arrow. In a flash, Youko yanked the sword out of the corpse, flicked the flowering blood off the steel, parried the sharp, hooked talons, and ran the sword through the bird’s legs.

The bird raised a strange cry, beat its wings. A great wind buffeted her as it tried to take itself back into the air. Youko stepped on its feet, freed the sword and sank the blade into its abdomen. She did not sense an immediate response to her thrust, but when she jumped back a moment later, pulling out the sword, blood gushed onto the ground.

It was easy work after that. Unable to hold itself aloft, the bird crashed to the earth. After a second strike and a third, she delivered the *coup de grace* and cut off its head. Nothing around her moved as she whipped the sword around in a great arc, flinging off the gore.

Not only the kochou, but people as well lay in heaps on the road. She could hear moaning, so that meant that not all of them were dead. Dispassionately observing all of this, she wiped off the sword using the neck of the kochou. She reminded herself, *I said I didn’t want anybody coming with me.*

“Rakushun . . . ?”

When she looked back up the road toward Goryou, she could just make out that the gates had opened wide enough to allow a line of soldiers to stream out.

She again surveyed the ground between herself and the city gates. Some distance removed from her, she spotted a fallen creature. Its gray fur was soaked with blood that had turned its coat a dark red.

“Rakushun.”

She started to run toward him, then looked again at the city gates. The soldiers pouring through the gates were calling out to each other, but she couldn’t catch what they were saying. She estimated the distance to Rakushun and the distance from him to the gates. She couldn’t judge the extent of his wounds from here, but doubted that all the blood muddying his fur had come from kochou crumpled up on the ground close by.

Youko grasped the jewels hanging around her neck. She didn’t know if the jewels worked with everybody or if, like the sword, they only responded to her. But if the jewels were not particular about who used them, they would likely help Rakushun.

Thinking this, she held the jewels, unable to move. She should run to him, determine the state of his injuries and see whether the jewels had the power to help him. As far as Rakushun was concerned, that would undoubtedly be the best thing to do. But all the while she was treating him with the jewels, the soldiers would be approaching. And the distance between them was simply not that great.

Standing there amongst the fallen bodies, Youko stood out like a sore thumb. Anybody observing from afar would have seen the kochou going at her and would know it had been her taking them down. That would strike anybody as more than a tad unusual.

She had a sword without a scabbard. It would take another two seconds to figure out that her hair was dyed. That she was a kaikyaku was as plain as the nose on her face.

But if I take off now. . . . She looked at the prone, unmoving matt of fur. She didn't think Rakushun would inform on her if she ran away and abandoned him here.

The sword that was the slender bundle she was carrying—the color of her dyed hair—dressed like a man—traveling to En by way of Agan—if such things were revealed, the noose would quickly draw tightly around her neck. But she didn't have the physical strength to haul Rakushun along with her.

For Rakushun's own good, she ought to go back. And for her own good

The blood throbbed in her veins.

Go over there and put him out of his misery.

The voice spoke inside herself, rebuking herself. She didn't have time to second-guess herself. If Rakushun said too much, Youko wouldn't last long. She couldn't go back. She'd be throwing her own life away. She couldn't cast Rakushun aside like this. That was just as dangerous.

If she went back, the best she could do was find Rakushun's purse and take it with her. At least then she'd have a chance to get herself out of this predicament. She had time to do that. And nothing else.

The gate opened wider. More and more people rushed out. She took one look at the approaching stampede and instinctively retreated.

Once she made her move, she wasn't going to stop. She spun around. The remaining travelers rushing in from the highway were on top of her. She slipped through the crowds and left the scene at a sprint.

Chapter 44

5-10 The falling dark cast the road into shadows. *It'll be okay*, she told herself as she walked along with hurried steps. *It will.*

After the night turned black and the pedestrian traffic vanished, she ran on without caring how it looked. Some distance from Goryou, she came to a fork in the road. That morning, the road they had started their journey on and the road to Goryou had parted ways.

She had come far enough, but she kept going. No longer in a headlong fashion, but with that pervasive sense of being pursued.

It'll be okay, she told herself again.

Even if Rakushun fessed up about her, they didn't have photographs in this place, so she didn't think they'd catch up with her. Besides, wouldn't Rakushun cover up his own involvement? He was unlikely to start talking about the kaikyaku who'd left him behind and taken off by herself, for fear of being thought guilty by association.

As she repeated this to herself, Youko stopped in her tracks. She felt a hole open up in her soul.

It was not the kind of thing she ought to be thinking about now.

Was Rakushun okay? Youko hadn't seen any severe wounds on him, but she couldn't know for certain that he wasn't badly injured.

Go back, a voice inside her said. She should go back and see how Rakushun was doing, and then make her escape.

Too dangerous, another voice said. Go back and you likely won't be able to do a thing.

You've got the jewels, a voice answered.

That didn't mean they'd do Rakushun any good. He could already be dead. Go back and she'd be captured. Get captured and it'd all be for naught. Get captured and *she'd* end up dead.

Is your life that precious to you?

There's no reason it shouldn't be.

You're stabbing your Good Samaritan in the back.

He didn't necessarily help me because he's good.

That doesn't change the reality of what he did. He gave you shelter and a place to hide.

He had his reasons. It wasn't out of the kindness of his heart. A person like that will betray you eventually.

So it's okay to abandon someone if their intentions aren't perfect? Do you really want to go down that road?

That place was filled with the dead and the dying, and amongst them was someone she knew, who knew her. And she was just going to cast him aside? Shouldn't she at least lend a helping hand? If she did, there were surely people there who might otherwise make it through alive.

Don't start glossing over reality with empty gestures, not in this country. When your number's up, that's it. Lights out.

It's not an empty gesture. No, it's what people naturally do of their own accord. How could she forget that?

"Even now, at this late hour, and you're going on about your *principles*, little girl?"

Even now, little girl. Even now!

"Yes, yes. Do go back and finish him off."

Youko jumped at the piercing sound of that screeching voice. The blue monkey's head appeared in the brush along the shoulder of the road. "Isn't that what you have been considering all along? Isn't it?"

"I" Youko stared at the blue monkey. Her whole body trembled.

"Indeed, that's what you plan to do, no? And look at you, little girl, preaching yourself up a regular old sermon and all. You! Now!"

The monkey broke into gales of mad laughter.

"No . . . it isn't."

"Oh, yes, it is. That is *exactly* what you were thinking."

"I would never do something like that!"

"Yes, you would."

"I wouldn't have. I couldn't!"

The monkey cackled gaily. "Is that because the thought of murder frightens you, or because you *wanted* to murder him, but just couldn't screw up the courage?" The monkey

screached, looking at her cheerfully. “Don’t you trust me? That’s okay. You’ll do it next time.”

“No!”

The blue monkey laughed on, ignoring her, the shrill sound remorselessly stabbing at her ears.

“I’m going back.”

“Even if you do, he’s long dead.”

“I don’t know that.”

“He’s dead, I say. Go back and you’ll be captured and killed. What’s the point?”

“I’m going back anyway.”

“Well. You think doing so will wash away your sins, no?”

Youko turned on her heels, and stopped.

“Oh, going back is good. So you go back, you look down at his dead body, you have yourself a good cry. It’d cancel out all those murderous thoughts just like that!”

Youko stared dumbfounded at the monkey’s cackling countenance. She was talking to herself. This was the sound of her own wretched voice. This was nothing other than the substance of her soul.

“He will surely betray you. Best you take care of it before then, no?”

“Be quiet.”

“Soldiers may be headed this way right now! That rat ratted you out for sure!”

“Shut up!” She took hold of the hilt of the sword and swung. The leafy tips of the bushes rained to the ground.

“Dying’s good, but snuffing out his candle would be *perfect*. You’re still so naïve, little girl.”

“Enough, already!”

“Next time, then. Next time something like this happens, you’ll be sure to get the deed done.”

“Quit messing with me!” A whusk of air and more leaves dropped to the ground.

And if she did get the deed done, then what? If only abandoning him left such a weight on her heart, how could she go on living with murder on her conscience? Did her existence by itself trump all? Did it matter what miserable depths she sank to as long as she could stay alive?

Better not to kill. Better not to act rashly, better to resist temptation, better not to go off half-cocked.

The monkey laughed her to scorn. “So you’re just going to leave him alive to squeal on you?”

“Fine if he does!” She felt a tightness in her chest as the tears welled up. “He’s got the right. Let him complain about me all he wants!”

“Oh, so naïve, so naïve.”

Why couldn’t she trust people anymore? It wasn’t because she was afraid of being taken in. Even if she was, she should have been able to trust him.

“It’s because you think credulous things like that. It’s because you’re such an easy mark, so easy to take advantage of.”

“It’d be fine with me if he did.”

“How gullible you are!” The monkey’s laughter rent the night. “Really? Truly? Being played for the fool is just peachy with you?”

“If that’s what it comes down to, yes. The betrayer only betrays his cowardice. It does me no harm. But better betrayed than be the betrayer.”

“Of course the betrayer is a coward, but in this demon-haunted world, he’s the one who comes out on top. No one will show you the slightest speck of kindness, little girl. Such souls do not exist here.”

“That has nothing to do with me.”

Because they tracked her down and drove her into a corner, was that reason enough to reject her own humanity? Was it reason enough to spurn anybody who approached her with good intentions? And then if their motives were not as pure as the driven snow, was that reason enough not to trust them in the least? If people showed her no more kindness than this, was that reason enough to show them no kindness as well?

“No, it is not.”

Whether she trusted others had nothing to do with whether or not she was betrayed. Whether or not others were kind to her had nothing to do with whether she was kind to them in turn. Even if she were all alone in this big, wide world, if not a single person would help her or grieve for her, that gave her no cause to play the jaded coward, to abandon those in need, to bring harm upon perfect strangers.

The monkey laughed hysterically. His earsplitting shrieks went on and on.

“I want to be strong.”

She firmly gripped the hilt of the sword. It had nothing to do with this world or these people. She wanted to live with her head held high. She wanted to be strong.

The monkey suddenly stopped laughing. “You are going to die. You will never go home. No one will see your face again. You’ll be deceived and betrayed. You will die.”

“I’m not going to die.”

If she died here, she’d die a fool and a coward. Dying now would validate the worst part of herself. It’d be easy to brand her life as one not worth living, but she couldn’t permit herself such an easy way out.

“You will die. You will starve, you will tire, you will lose your head, and you will die.”

She swung the sword with all her might. The tip of the sword trimmed off the tops of the bushes and parted the air. She felt a strong reverberation in her arm. The monkey’s head tumbled down amidst the falling leaves, falling to the earth, scattering clots of blood as it rolled along.

“I will never give up.”

She could not stop crying.

She wiped away the tears with a stiff sleeve and started to leave. The color of gold glinted at her feet. For a long moment, Youko could not grasp what she was seeing. She stared, amazed. There it was, in the middle of a pool of dark blood where the monkey’s head should be, what she had lost so long ago.

The scabbard of the sword.

Part VI

Chapter 45



ouko said, “He’s about this tall.” She grabbed hold of a passerby and indicated the height of a human child. “You haven’t seen someone who looks like a rat?”

The old woman regarded Youko suspiciously. “What’s this about? A hanjuu?”

“Yes. I heard that he was injured last night at the city gates.”

“Oh, you mean that kochou attack.” As she spoke, the old woman looked back over her shoulder. Goryou was visible in the distance. “Well, if you’re talking about them people injured yesterday, they’d be in one of the government buildings. The government is tending to their needs.”

It was the answer Youko had been hearing all morning.

She’d waited until morning to return to Goryou, but with the guards at the gate going over everybody with a fine-toothed comb, getting into the city would be well-nigh impossible. Even if she thought checking out the municipal buildings was a good idea, there was no way she’d get anywhere near the place.

“Why not go to the city hall and see for yourself?”

“Yes, well, um, he didn’t seem to be there.”

“In that case, you’d better check around the back.”

With that, the old woman resumed her journey. Around the back of the city was where the corpses were piled up in rows. Youko could see them from a distance, but even there, the guards had their eyes peeled. She couldn’t get close enough to tell if Rakushun was among the dead.

The old lady had a big pack on her back. Youko helped her on her way and then approached the next group of travelers coming from Goryou.

“Excuse me,” she said, flagging down a man and woman. The man’s foot was wrapped in bandages and he was using a cane. Youko repeated the same questions she had asked the old lady. They looked back at her with dubious expressions.

“Yesterday, a friend of mine was injured . . .”

“You!” The man abruptly pointed at Youko. “I don’t believe it! From yesterday, you’re that kid . . .”

Youko spun around. She didn’t need to hear the rest.

“Hey, wait a minute!”

Youko ignored him and ran off, darting through the lines of travelers.

The man’s injuries had no doubt been inflicted during the attack. And he’d remembered her. Since this morning, she’d had to flee like this a number of times. And

every time she returned, the number of guards at the gate increased. The city was getting that much harder to approach.

She left Goryou and went into the foothills and waited for things to calm down. If she kept at it like this, she was sure to be arrested. But even knowing this, she couldn't leave Goryou.

Even if I do find out, then what?

She had to find out how Rakushun had fared. It wasn't because she was trying to make up for abandoning him yesterday. That sin had been committed, and there was no taking it back. Even if she got word that he was okay, she wouldn't go into the city just to apologize to him. The guards would be on her in a second. And her death wouldn't end up meaning anything more than that, after all.

I haven't the slightest idea what to do next.

On the one hand, she had the sense that she was thinking too highly of her miserable existence. On the other, she had no desire to recklessly throw her life away. Unable to come to a resolution either way, she couldn't bring herself to put Goryou behind her.

She wandered around, returning time and time again to the gates of Goryou. She approached traveler after traveler, asking the same questions and getting the same answers. She found herself at a complete loss.

"Well, hello there."

Somebody called out behind her. Youko's initial impulse was to run. But as she glanced over her shoulder, among the faces in the crowd she saw a woman and child looking back at her.

"We met outside Bakurou, didn't we?"

Youko stopped in her tracks, momentarily overcome with surprise. It was the mother and child she had met some time ago on a mountain road. They were syrup peddlers, and they traveled with their merchandise strapped to their backs. They were still carrying those big packs.

"This is wonderful. You're all right." The mother smiled a rather puzzled smile. Her daughter looked up at Youko with an even more perplexed look on her face.

"Your injuries healed up okay, I take it?"

After a moment of confusion, Youko nodded and then bowed her head more deeply. "Thank you very much for what you did."

She had brushed aside the helping hand they held out to her and ventured into the mountains. She had thanked them with words, but not from the bottom of her heart.

"It is good to see you again. We worried about you." The woman smiled, this time a less-labored smile. "You see, Gyokuyou, she's fine."

She looked down at the girl, who was staring up at Youko with that confused expression on her face. The girl snuggled closer to her mother. Youko tried to smile and realized that she hadn't smiled in a long time. The muscles in her face were stiff and unresponsive. It hardly felt like a smile at all.

Gyokuyou blinked, and with a peevish expression, tried to hide herself behind her mother. Youko leaned over and forced a smile to her lips. If they hadn't given her water and the sweet syrup, she would not have survived the night. "I'll always be grateful for the water and candy you gave me."

The girl glanced back and forth between Youko and her mother. She started to laugh, and then, perhaps feeling self-conscious, grew serious again. But a moment later, she giggled. The look on her face was so endearing and childlike, it almost brought Youko to tears.

“I really am grateful. I’m sorry I didn’t have the opportunity to properly thank you.”

A smile filled Gyokuyo’s face. “Did it hurt?” she asked.

“Hurt?”

“Were you in a bad mood because it hurt so much?”

“Oh, yes. I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t hurt anymore?”

“No. It’s healed up fine.” She showed her the fading scar in her hand. She wondered if it would occur to either of them that the wound had healed much faster than a wound like that normally would.

Gyokuyou glanced up at her mother. “She says it’s healed,” she said.

Her mother’s eyes brightened. “That’s wonderful. After we got to Bakurou, we wanted to come back and find you. But by the time we arrived, the gates were already closing, and none of the guards had the guts to go out after nightfall. Are you looking for someone?”

Youko nodded.

“We’re headed for Goryou as well. Do you want to come with?”

Youko could only shake her head, no.

“Well, then,” the mother said. She took her daughter by the hand. “Gyokuyou, let’s go to the inn.” Then she looked at Youko. “Who are you searching for? A hanjuu, isn’t it?”

Youko stared at her.

“He’d probably be in one of the government buildings, or around in the back. What’s his name?”

“His name is Rakushun.”

She hitched up the big pack on her back and said, almost as if in passing, “You stay here, and we’ll go and see.”

Youko bowed deeply. “Thank you.”

It was toward sundown when the woman returned, alone. She reported that she hadn’t found anybody called Rakushun among the living or the dead and then hurried back to the city. She gave no indication of whether she understood anything more of the quandary Youko was in.

Chapter 46

6-2 Having confirmed this much, Youko gave up on the effort. Maybe Rakushun had left the city without her knowledge. Maybe the woman had overlooked him. There was no way for her to know for sure.

Standing on the highway outside Goryou, Youko faced the city and bowed. She understood only that this was some sort of divine retribution. And that here, in this place, she had come at last to the line she could not cross.

She traveled during the night, slept during the day. Her old life resumed. Having traveled this way so often, Youko's experiences of this country were of nothing but night.

Because Rakushun had been carrying the purse, she had no money. The nights she spent fighting the youma, the days she spent sleeping hungry in the undergrowth. The days all ran together. She didn't have time to feel sorry for herself. This time around, she had a goal, she had a destination. She was going to Agan and then sailing to the Kingdom of En. She couldn't be bothered to think about anything other than how she could come up with the money for the voyage.

After the old kaikyaku in Takkyuu (拓丘) ripped her off, Youko figured she'd wandered around for at least a month. With nothing to eat or drink, drawing on the powers of the jewels, that had proved her limit. With that understanding, this time around, she was far more confident than on her previous adventures.

The blue monkey did not reappear. Since reclaiming the scabbard, the visions had gone dormant as well. The faint sounds of falling water would chime, and light would shine out of the narrow gap where the scabbard rested against the hilt, but she didn't dare to draw the sword from the scabbard to see what the visions had in store for her. Instead, she forged on in silence, persistently pushing herself forward.

What a despicable thing to do. Do you really think your own life is so precious?

As she walked along, the blue monkey's words echoed in her heart. He was the substance of her own conscience to begin with, so she didn't need him around to hear his voice clearly.

So precious. But still the kind of life that throws a Good Samaritan to the wolves, no?

"It may not be worth much, but right now, it's the only life I've got. That's the way it is."

You should have turned yourself in. That would have made up for everything, no?

"I'll consider it once I get to En."

It seemed she could even hear the monkey's cackling laughter. *In other words, your life is the only life that matters around here.*

"You got it. As long as I'm being hunted down, staying alive is what counts. Once I don't have that to worry about anymore, once I'm back to living a *real* life, on my own terms, then I'll think about what sort of life I should be living. Then I'll have time to think things over and make amends."

Right now, all that mattered was staying alive.

And killing youma and assaulting people.

"For the time being, I don't have a choice. The only thing worth thinking about is getting to En as quickly as possible, no time for detours. If I can get to En, then at least I'll be able to face my enemies and settle things without using a sword."

So once you get to En, you think all your troubles will go away?

"Not likely, but I've got to find Keiki, I've got to find a way home. There will be plenty of other things to think about then."

You still think Keiki is your ally? Really?

"I'll decide when we meet. I'm not dwelling on it in the meantime."

Even if you do meet Keiki, you're not going home.

"Until I know that for certain, I'm not giving up."

You want to go home that badly? Nobody is waiting for you.

“I don’t care. I’m going home.”

Back in her old world, Youko had conducted her life based on what she saw in other people’s faces. She lived to be liked by everyone, disliked by no one. Confrontation terrified her. The thought of being scolded scared her to death. After this, she didn’t think that anything would be very frightening.

Or perhaps it had never been about cowardice at all. Perhaps she had simply been lazy. It was easier to do as other people said than think for herself. Rather than go to the wall for somebody or something, it was easier to go along and avoid confrontation. Being the good girl everybody wanted her to be was easier than following her own mind and taking things on as they came. She had lived a lazy, cowardly life. That’s why she wanted to go back. If she could go home now, she could make a different life for herself. She wanted to at least have the chance to try.

She quietly pondered these thoughts as she walked along.

The rain increased. It may have been the rainy season. Camping outdoor was a pain when it rained, so she often stopped at one of the secluded hamlets along the way and asked for shelter.

There were those who would let her stay in the corner of a barn and those who wanted money. There were those who called the constables on her, as well as those who looked in the mood to give her a good beating and throw her out in the street. On the other hand, there were those who, despite their meager circumstances, would give her a meal to eat.

Along the way, she figured out she could work in exchange for a night’s room and board. In exchange for lodging, she’d put herself in the employ of that family. She found herself all types of jobs. She worked in the fields, cleaned houses, did odd jobs, looked after livestock and mucked out the styes, dug graves, and anything else that came down the pike.

Thanks to these jobs, she got herself a bed for the night and put aside a bit of money as well.

She wandered from hamlet to hamlet, picking up work along the way. If trouble presented itself, she drew her sword and got out of there. If the constables were called out, everybody would get skittish for a while, and it was back to roughing it until things cooled down. She was often attacked by youma, their numbers increasing bit by bit, but she was also getting used to fighting her enemies.

She’d been traveling for a month when she spotted what seemed to be a bunch of gendarmes coming up the road after her. If she sought lodging, she’d leave a trail that could be tracked. She couldn’t go leaving her calling card behind while she was being pursued, or they would catch up with her eventually. But she knew all this and didn’t let it knock her off her game.

She headed up into the mountains and managed to shake them, but after that, she saw soldiers on the road more and more often.

The only thing that concerned her was if Agan had been locked down in the meantime. When she got closer to Agan, she did without lodging. She separated herself

from the main road and became more careful about attracting unwanted attention, forging through the mountains instead.

Rakushun had said that it was a month's walk to Agan, but by the time the harbor came into view, a full two months had passed.

Chapter 47

6-3 Before the gates of Agan, Youko flagged down a fellow traveler. "Um, excuse me."

The city of Agan was situated on the slopes of a hilly terrain. Descending the road that wound down from the highlands, the Port of Agan came into view.

The so-called Blue Sea really was blue, the waves breaking on the shore white. Within the embrace of the peninsula that encircled the Agan coast, white sails floated on the blue, transparent sea. Beyond the peninsula, she could see the unbroken horizon. How this world could be flat was a mystery to her.

A number of roads came together at the gates of Agan. The city was big, and a great many people were going in and coming out. She slipped in amongst the crowds and called out to what looked like a good-natured person.

"Excuse me, but could you tell me how to get a ship to En?"

The middle-aged man politely instructed her. She also inquired about the price of a ticket. She'd managed to scrape together enough money during her journey to get her to En.

"When does the next ship depart?"

"There's one leaving on the fifth. That's three days from today."

Youko confirmed the ship's departure time. If she messed this up and the harbor got closed down, it'd all be for naught. She asked about everything she thought she might need to know, and then bowed. "Thank you very much. You've been a great help."

She left Agan at once and spent the next two days in the mountains. The ship was scheduled to leave in the morning. The day before, she again went to the gates of Agan.

The guards were on their toes. Because she would have to spend the night in the town, she couldn't do anything to attract any suspicion. Youko looked at her sword, wrapped up in its cloth shroud. Now at least she had the scabbard. Still, she didn't see many travelers wearing swords on their belts, so it wouldn't do to stand out in the crowd.

If not for the sword, the risk here would be less. She'd given much thought to discarding the sword here in Kou, but even if she could, she had no desire to. As long as she was being pursued by the youma, it was necessary for her survival. It just wasn't a sword the guards were on the lookout for, so she didn't think getting rid of it would by itself improve her situation.

She cut some long grass in the mountains and wrapped the sword up in a bundle that, at a glance, would not be taken for a sword. Toward evening, she crouched on the road holding the bundle and waited for the right opportunity.

Soon after she sat down, she heard a man's voice. "Hey, kid, what's the problem?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Just my foot acting up."

The man gave her a suspicious look and hurried on toward Agan. She watched him leave and continued to sit there. After the third such inquiry, she spotted the kind of

companions she was looking for, a man and wife with two children. “What’s the matter?” she was asked.

“I guess I’m not feeling very well.”

Youko didn’t look up as she spoke. The woman reached out and touched her. “Are you all right?”

Youko only shook her shoulders. If this didn’t work, if she couldn’t gin up some sympathy for her plight, she’d have to dump the sword and risk the consequences. The strain was enough to make her break out in a real sweat.

“Are you sick? You’re almost to Agan. Can you walk that far?”

Youko nodded slightly. The man put his arm around her. “Well, then, hold on. It’s only a little further. You can make it.”

Youko nodded again and put her hand on his shoulder. When she stood up, she intentionally let the bundle fall to the ground. When she stooped to get it, the woman picked it up for her and said to the children. “Why don’t you carry this. It’s not heavy.”

She handed it to the older boy, who took it with a serious look on his face.

“Can you walk? We can summon the guards, if you’d like.”

Youko shook her head. “I’m sorry. I’ll be okay. My friends already went ahead and are getting a room.”

The man laughed. “Is that so? You’ve got somebody with you, that’s great.”

Youko nodded, clinging gently to the man’s shoulder as they walked along. She intended to appear beholding toward the man helping her, while garnering as much sympathy as possible from the people around them.

They drew nearer to the gates. The guards flanking the gates were inspecting the stream of people hurrying toward them. She passed through the gates. She felt eyes on her, but no one raised his voice. After putting a bit of distance between her and the gates, Youko finally allowed herself to breathe. When she peeked back over her shoulder, the gates were far away enough so that she could not make out the faces of the guards.

Score.

Sighing with relief, Youko took her hand off the man’s shoulder. “Thank you. I’m feeling much better.”

“Will you be okay? We can take you as far as the inn.”

“That’s okay. I’ll be fine from here. I’m really grateful for your help.”

She bowed deeply. She wasn’t lying. The words came from the bottom of her heart.

The man and wife exchanged glances. “Take care,” they said.

The city was bustling with refugees. Worried about falling under the wary eye of an innkeeper, she found an open space along the city walls and spent the night there.

The welcome morning finally came. Youko followed the city streets to the harbor. The city center faced the water, and where it opened up, there was a shabby wharf and a boat tied up at the pier. It looked to Youko’s eyes rather small, but it was bigger than all the other ships lying at anchor.

“There it is”

She approached the wharf, a flood of emotions filling her chest. She stopped herself. Soldiers were inspecting the line of passengers boarding the ship. For a moment, everything went dark. They were searching the passengers’ luggage as well.

She had no desire to get rid of the sword. She'd managed to get this close staying in the shadows, and could get no closer. Youko stared at the guards and passengers.

Do I lose the sword?

She'd lose her primary means of defense, but it was better than staying behind in Kou. Yet thinking this, seeing the water not far from where she stood, she couldn't bring herself to do it. It was what tied her to Keiki. Lose it and she'd sever the half of her connection to him. It'd be as much as severing her ties to her home.

What to do?

She turned the question over and over in her mind and could not come to a decision. She looked around the harbor. Was there any way to get to En and keep the sword? Several small boats were moored there. Could she steal one of them?

I haven't the slightest idea how to sail a boat.

She'd heard that the Blue Sea was an inland sea. So while she couldn't imagine how long it would take, she ought to be able to make it to En by following the shoreline. Dazed by the tumult of her own thoughts, she suddenly heard the loud pounding of a drum. She looked up, startled. The sound was coming from the deck of the ship. It was the signal that the ship would soon be departing. The line of passengers was gone. The soldiers were standing idly by.

I'm not going to make it.

Even if she made a run for it now, the guards would grab her. There wasn't enough time to undo the bundle and take out the sword. And if she dumped everything, it would look equally suspicious trying to board a ship without any luggage at all. Frozen with indecision, she watched as the ship raised its sail.

The gangplank was withdrawn. Youko jumped out from her hiding place. The ship edged slowly away from the pier, where the guards stood observing the departure. She ran toward it, but could not risk getting any closer. She watched dumbfounded as the ship set sail. The image of the white sails burned into her retinas

If I do it now, I can jump.

Ideas raced through her head, but she could not act on any of them.

That's my ticket out of here.

Hugging the bundle to her chest, eyes wide, she could do nothing but watch the ship sail away. So much had depended on her making this escape, and she didn't think she would recover from the shock.

“What's the matter?” a rough voice said. “Miss your ride?”

Youko started, the gravelly voice bringing herself back to her senses. Down where the piles of the wharf were driven into the earth, she saw a vessel. Four men were working on the deck. One of them was looking up at her.

Youko nodded stiffly. The next ship wasn't for five more days. Those five days would probably settle her fate.

“Well, come on, kid. You want a ride or no?”

For a moment, Youko didn't grasp what he was saying and only stared.

“Hurry up, then. You got other plans?”

Youko shook her head. The sailors grabbed hold of the rope tied to the bollard next to her. “Loosen that up there and jump aboard. We'll catch up with them at Fugou (浮濠). But you've got to work for your passage.”

The other sailors thought that was a pretty funny offer. Youko nodded as resolutely as she could. She undid the rope from the bollard and, holding it tightly, jumped down onto the deck.

It was a cargo ship that went as far as the island of Fugou, just north of Agan. It was a full twenty-four hours to Fugou. From Fugou to En there were no more ports of call.

Save a ferry ride on a school field trip once, Youko had never been on a boat. And this was certainly the first time in her life she'd been on a sailing vessel.

She had no idea what she was doing, but every time one of the sailors barked at her, she hauled something here or straightened up something there and generally chased her own tail around the ship. When they left the coast and the ship settled into its course, she found herself being told to do this, that, and the other thing, from scrubbing the dishes to cooking dinner. Finally, they even had her massaging the legs of some old salt of a first mate. Whenever anybody asked her about herself, she mumbled a half-hearted reply, and they laughed about how she was a reticent little brat, but thankfully didn't pry anymore into her affairs.

The ship sailed on through the night without rest and arrived at Fugou harbor the next morning.

The ship bound for En had already arrived and was resting quietly in its berth. The sailors worked Youko right up to the last minute. At last, not even coming into dock, they brought the boat alongside the passenger ship and called out to one of the seamen and requested that Youko be allowed to come aboard. She shimmied up the pole that had been lowered to the boat. After she boarded the ship, somebody threw a small parcel up onto the deck.

"Some dumplings for you. Put a little meat on your bones."

One of the sailors on the boat waved to her. Youko picked up the parcel and waved back. "Thank you."

"You're a good worker. Take care now."

They laughed goodheartedly. The men hauling up the fender—youko had been the one who had lowered it—were the last people she saw as she left Kou.



Chapter 48

6-4 The inner sea was so wide that Youko could not see the opposing shore. Standing on the deck, breathing in the salt spray, it looked like a perfectly normal sea. The ship left Fugou and crossed the bright blue water, heading north to Ugou (鳥号) as the bird flies. From Fugou to Ugou, it was a journey of three days and two nights.

When the coast of En first came into view, it looked no different than Kou. But as the ship drew closer, the differences became apparent. A well-maintained harbor and the huge city looming up behind it. Ugou was bigger than any city Youko had seen in Kou. Save for the buildings, she could have been looking at a city in Japan. It was obvious that a fair percentage of the passengers gathered on the deck were seeing Ugou for the first time too, and along with Youko, stared in amazement.

The city itself was set off to the side of the harbor, surrounded by walls that enclosed the city in the shape of a "U." The city wound leisurely up the side of the facing

mountains. In the distance, the richly-colored architectural decor ran together into a subdued, rosy hue. Around the circumference of the city and about its center, she observed tall, finely-built stone buildings. One was a clock tower, and her eyes opened wide as she saw it.

The harbor was developed to a degree to which Agan could not compare. The number of ships lying at anchor far outstripped those at Agan. The harbor was alive and bustling. The masts stood together like trees. The furled white and pale red sails accented the gorgeous panorama. Having finally arrived here after escaping such a harsh country, Youko gazed at it all as if there could be nothing else to compare to such a spectacle.

Descending from the ship, Youko looked out over the throngs. This was a city that left its inhabitants in good spirits. The faces of the people streaming by were full of vitality and life, and her own face was likely the same. Down on the dock, Youko found herself in the midst of bedlam. Men working madly, children running around doing heaven knows what, the voices of people and peddlers, thrumming together in a frenzied rhythm.

She was standing there on the pier when the voice called out to her.

“Youko?”

Her head snapped around at the sound of a voice she could not have possibly expected. She saw the charcoal-gray coat, fine whiskers gleaming silver in the light of the midday sun

“Rakushun”

The rat pushed his way through the crowds to Youko’s side. With his small, pink paw, he grabbed the bewildered Youko by the hand. “This is so great. You arrived safely.”

“How . . . ?”

“Take a ship from Agan and you’re bound to arrive in Ugou. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“For me?”

Rakushun nodded. He tugged on Youko’s hand. She was still frozen with surprise.

“I waited for a while at Agan. When you didn’t turn up, I thought maybe you’d gone on ahead of me. But there was neither hide nor hair of you here. So I decided that every time a ship came into port, I’d come down and look for you. I figured you might have gotten delayed, but made it through just the same.”

The rat looked up at Youko and smiled.

“But why, for me?”

Rakushun rounded his back and bowed his head. “I wasn’t thinking. I should have let you have the money, at least half. You must have had a rough time getting here. I’m sorry about that.”

“But . . . *I’m* the one who ran off and left you behind.”

“I blame myself for that as well. I really messed up.” The rat smiled bitterly. “And a good thing you did run. If the guards had arrested you, then what? Better if I had told you myself and given you the purse, but I kind of got myself knocked out cold.”

“Rakushun”

“I was really worried about what happened to you after that. I’m glad to see you’re okay.”

“It’s not that I abandoned you because I had no choice.”

“Really?”

“Really. The idea of traveling with another person gave me the willies. I didn’t think I could trust anybody. I thought I was surrounded by no one but my enemies. That’s why.”

Rakushun twitched his whiskers. “Does that include me now?”

Youko shook her head.

“All’s well, then. Well, let’s get going.”

“Don’t you hate me for double-crossing you?”

“I might think you a fool for doing so, but, no, I don’t have any particular reason to hate you.”

“I even thought of going back and killing you.”

Rakushun started to walk off, still holding her hand. He stopped in his tracks. “You know, Youko”

“Yes.”

“To tell the truth, when I realized that you had gone off and left me there, I was a little let down. Only a little. I knew that you didn’t trust me. The whole time, you were worried I was going to try and pull something. Still, along the way, I had hoped the truth would sink in. When you ran off without me, I knew you hadn’t. So I was a little disappointed. But if you’ve finally come to your senses, then it’s all good.”

“It’s not all good. You’ve got every reason in the world to tell me good riddance and send me packing.”

“Whether I do or not, that’s up to me, isn’t it? I wished for you to trust me. If you do, then that makes me happy. If not, then not so much. But that’s *my* problem. Whether you trust me or not, that’s up to you. Trusting me may be to your benefit or to your loss. But that’s *your* problem.”

Youko humbly bowed her head. “Rakushun, I don’t deserve your friendship.”

“Hey, hey, what’s this all of a sudden?”

“It’s just that I get myself into these snits and convince myself that I have no friends in this world.”

“Youko.” Rakushun tugged on her arm with his small hand.

“I am so totally messed up.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am.”

“You’re not. Youko. After all, I’m not the one who was washed ashore in a strange land and then chased around it from one end to the other.”

For a moment, Youko stared down at Rakushun’s face. Rakushun looked up at her and laughed. “You’ve really pulled yourself together, Youko. You’re in a fine fettle.”

“What?”

“I knew it as soon as you came off the boat. A blind man couldn’t miss it a mile away.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. So, shall we get going?”

“Go where?”

“The prefecture building. If you’re a kaikyaku and get yourself properly registered, people will do what they can to help. The officials will write letters of introduction for

you, or so I've heard. You were taking your time getting here, so I did a bit of wandering about myself and went to the local prefecture building and checked it out. That's what they told me."

"Rakushun, you're unbelievable."

For whatever reason, one by one, doors now seemed to be opening up to her.

Chapter 49

6-5 "This is one happening town."

The crowds of people bustling back and forth and proprietors shouting out their wares from the storefronts only added to the lively atmosphere.

"You're surprised."

"Yeah."

"I'd heard that En was a wealthy kingdom, but when I saw Ugou for the first time, even I was taken aback."

Youko nodded. The streets were wide in the same way that the dimensions of the whole city were big. The castle walls that surrounded the city must be a good ten meters thick. On the city-side of the walls, shop stalls had been hollowed-out of the stone and businesses were thriving there as well. They very much resembled under-girder kiosks in Japan.

The buildings were made of wood and reached three stories. The ceilings were high, and every window was glazed with glass. Here and there was a huge building made of brick and stone. It all came together to create a curious, pervasive, Chinatown-like atmosphere. The streets were paved with stone, with drainage ditches running down both sides. There were parks and plazas. None of this had she ever seen in Kou.

Youko said, looking at her surroundings, "I feel like a country bumpkin."

Rakushun laughed. "I thought the same. And I *am* a country bumpkin."

"Just how many layers of fortifications are there?"

"Eh?"

Youko pointed out to Rakushun where the high walls could be seen here and there rising above the surrounding houses and stores.

"Well, technically, a city's outer walls are called the *ramparts*, and the inner wall protecting the keep is called the *bailey*. In Kou, cities with baileys are rare. That's the remnant of an old rampart left over from when the city grew bigger and expanded beyond it."

"Wow."

Refugees from Kei were camped out at the foot of the ramparts and in the plaza, in neat and tidy rows of similar-looking tents that gave no indication of disorder. According to Rakushun, the tents were also provisioned by the local government.

"So, is this a provincial capital?"

"No, a prefectural seat."

"The prefecture is one step below a province?"

"Two steps below. Starting with hamlets of twenty-five households, it goes, from smallest to largest: hamlet, town, township, county, prefecture, district, province."

"How many districts are in a province?"

“It depends on the location.”

“If this is a prefectural seat, then district and provincial capitals must be huge.”

“According to official designations, a district capital was a city that was home to a district administration, also called a district seat. For administrative purposes, districts were designated as having populations of fifty thousand households, though that didn’t necessarily mean that fifty thousand people lived in a single district. Generally speaking, in terms of urbanization, a town was bigger than a hamlet, a district capital bigger than a county seat, the capital of a province bigger than a district capital.”

“How is it that En and Kou can be this different?”

Rakushun answered with a thin smile. “The difference is in the characters of the rulers.”

“The difference in their characters?”

Rakushun glanced back at her and nodded. “The Royal En is an unusually enlightened monarch. He is said to have reigned for five hundred years. The Royal Kou has been around for maybe fifty years. He’s hardly in the same league.”

Youko blinked. “Five *hundred* years?”

“The Royal Sou of the Kingdom of Sou is the next longest. It’s said that the longer a king rules, the more enlightened his governance becomes. Sou is also a wealthy country.”

“A single king reigns for five *hundred* years?”

“Of course. Kings are gods, not ordinary human beings. The degree to which Heaven allows a king to govern is commensurate with the caliber of the king. So, the better a king rules, the longer he will reign.

“Huh.”

“A kingdom whose king is deposed will in every case fall into chaos, while a kingdom with a wise king prospers. In particular, the Royal En has proved to be a most shrewd reformer. And speaking of enlightened monarchs, Royal Sou is said to be one as well, who has made the Kingdom of Sou a place of peace and tranquility. En, on the other hand, is, as you say, a ‘happening’ place.”

“It is, indeed.”

“No doubt about it. Oh, here’s the prefecture building.”

Rakushun pointed to a large brick building. The walls and eaves were decorated after a Chinese fashion, and though the architecture was in the “western” style, the combination did not clash. The interior decor was similarly a potpourri of Occidental and Oriental tastes.

The first thing Youko said after they left was, “This place is incredible.”

Rakushun nodded. “I always knew that Kou was hard on kaikyaku, but I wouldn’t have believed that En was this different.”

Youko agreed. She examined the wooden card she had been given by the administrator. On the front was a red seal and beneath it in black ink, “Conferred in Ugou, Tei Province (貞州), Haku District (白郡), Shuuyou Prefecture (首陽郷).” On the back was her name. It was her identification card.

The official Youko had been brought to asked for her name, her address in Japan, her occupation and other details, including, most surprisingly, her postal code and area code, before handing over the identification card.

“By the way, Youko, um, what are postal codes and area codes?”

The official had asked the same question as Rakushun. Apparently he didn't know either. "Just following regulations," he said, opening a volume in a set of books. Sneaking a peek at the Japanese-style bound volume, Youko saw that it contained rows of numbers printed with woodblock characters.

"A postal code, or zip code, is a number you put at the end of an address when you mail a letter. An area code is a number you dial when you call somebody on the telephone outside your local calling area."

"Telephone?"

"Um, it's a gizmo that transmits your voice a long distance so you can talk to people."

"To think they have such things in Japan. But why would he ask about it?" Rakushun quivered his whiskers. "Probably because someone who wasn't Japanese wouldn't know such a thing. Makes it easy to tell who is a kaikyaku and who's not. Otherwise, you'd have people pretending to be kaikyaku all over the place."

Youko laughed and showed him the card. "That must be it."

This card was proof of her bona fides, but it was good for only three years. In three years, it was expected that you would find a livelihood, at which time you would officially register with the census. In exchange, during your three years as a ward of the state, you had free access to the local community colleges and hospitals. Not only that, if you took your identification card to a kind of bank called a trade credit union, you could collect a stipend to cover your living expenses.

"What a country!"

"Yes, indeed."

Kou was so much poorer, En so much richer. If nothing else, that's what the card taught them.

The Royal En should by no means prove to be an unapproachable individual. Rakushun said she should ask him for help. She still had her doubts about the likelihood of that ever happening. She had her doubts about a lot of things, but felt more confident that she wouldn't be rejected out of hand or summarily punished for making the attempt.

Chapter 50

6-6 As Rakushun had predicted, many beasts mingled in with the crowds on the streets. Amidst the hustle and bustle, there was something unbearably cute about these animals walking about on their two hind legs. Some were even dressed like people, and Youko had to try hard not to giggle.

While he was waiting for her, Rakushun had gotten work at the harbor doing maintenance on the ships coming into port. He told her enthusiastically all about it.

Still, he took the occasion of meeting up with Youko to quit his first job ever. When she insisted that it was all right with her to stay a while longer in Ugou while he gave his notice, Rakushun said that when he signed up, he had told the foreman that he only wanted to work until the person he was waiting for arrived, so it was no big deal.

The day after Youko arrived, they set forth for Kankyuu. Their expenses were not high, and with her rather generous stipend, they could afford to travel in some luxury. They walked along the highway during the day, and at night, stopped in at a city and found an inn. All of the cities in En were big, and for the same fee, you got that much more than a comparable inn in Kou. They'd arrive at dusk, arrange for lodgings, and then go sightseeing. Rakushun particularly liked checking out what the shops had on display.

It was an uneventful trip. Nobody came chasing after her, though it took her some time to train herself not to recoil every time she saw a guard or constable. They never left the cities at night, so she couldn't confirm this for herself, but from what she gathered from conversations with people, even if you traveled at night, you hardly ever ran into a youma.

It was in the midst of their journey, eleven days out from Ugou and about a third of the way to Kankyuu, that Rakushun went out for a stroll while Youko was taking a bath, and heard talk about another kaikyaku.

Though Rakushun had pointed out that because they were in En, it'd be okay to show herself off a bit more, Youko preferred men's clothing. It was more comfortable, and having gotten used to it, she had no desire to put on a woman's long kimono.

So, of course, everybody took her for a boy. This made using public baths a pain. The inns in En often had a *furo*, but they were more like a communal sauna, so she made do by bathing in their room. Because they had money to spare, even after taking care of their travel expenses, they always got a room. Still, it seemed a bit pointless since they settled for one room, and whenever she took a bath, she kicked Rakushun out. Rakushun no doubt found it annoying.

She filled a basin with hot water and washed her hair. She hadn't been in this world very long when Takki dyed her hair. As the days and months passed, her hair had grown out. Takki made the dye from roots in her garden. Copying what she had observed Takki do, Youko had searched for the same kind of roots. Through trial and error, she was able to fashion a dye of sorts. But the species of root or the process itself was wrong because the dye washed out afterwards.

At this point, her hair wasn't so different from its original red. She was getting used to the strange color. She still got an odd vibe when looking at herself in the mirror, but the visage wasn't unbearable. She bathed and dressed, all the more aware that she was getting used to this life.

When Rakushun got back, he told her about the kaikyaku. "It seems there's a kaikyaku living in Houryou (芳陵), the local prefectural seat. It's along the way."

Youko raised her eyes for a moment and then looked away. "Oh, really."

She didn't want to meet him. And even if she did, the thought of hanging out with a fellow countryman and getting all depressed was even more painful.

"They say he goes by the name of Heki Rakujin (壁落人)."

"Heki Rakujin?"

"He's something like a professor at a prefectural college."

That being the case, he wouldn't be the old man who had ripped her off. And when she thought it through, it wasn't likely she would run into him here. But that was only a minor comfort.

"Shall we go and see him?" Rakushun looked at Youko with hopeful eyes.



“Well, it’d probably be a good idea.”

“Then you’ll go?”

“Sure . . . I guess.”

The next day, they departed from the road to Kankyuu and headed to Houryuu to visit the school.

Shire schools here were called *jogaku* (序学), and prefectural academies were called *shougaku* (庠学). In En, students aiming for a district university (上庠, *joushou*) could do their preparatory work at a prefectural academy, or could attend a prefectural polytechnic college (庠序, *shoujo*). This “Professor Heki” they were visiting taught at such a shoujo. He lived in a compound at the school.

Dropping in on a professor out of the blue was bad manners. Following formal procedures, a letter was sent and an interview requested. The reply from Heki Rakujin arrived at their inn the next morning. The courier bearing the reply accompanied them to the school.

The schools in Houryou were located within the inner bailey wall of the city, built in the archetypal Chinese style. With its expansive gardens, the school resembled more a wealthy estate than a school. They were led to a small gazebo where they waited. The next person they saw was Heki Rakujin.

He said, “Please excuse the delay. I am Heki.”

His age was hard to tell. Older than thirty, younger than fifty, Youko thought. He seemed both old and young. A gentle smile came easily to his smooth, unwrinkled face. He had a completely different air about him than that old man, Seizou Matsuyama.

“Did you receive our letter?” Rakushun asked. “We, um, thank you so very much for sparing a moment of your precious time with us.”

Rakujin smiled at Rakushun’s overly polite language. “Relax. Make yourselves at home.”

“Um . . .” Rakushun scratched at the bottom of his ear. He looked at Youko. “This is the kaikyaku.”

The man responded at once to Rakushun’s introduction. “Of course. But she doesn’t look much like a kaikyaku to me.” He turned to Youko.

“I suppose I don’t.”

He laughed. “I can’t say I ever saw that color of hair in Japan.”

“Um . . .”

Responding to the inquiring look in his eyes, Youko explained her predicament. Why, she didn’t know, but since coming here, she had changed like this. It wasn’t only the color of her hair. Her face, body, even her voice had changed.

When she finished talking, Rakujin nodded. “That means you’re a *taika*.”

“Me?” Youko’s eyes opened wide. “A *taika*?”

“When there is a shoku, here and there get mixed up together. People come here and *ranka* go there.”

“I don’t get it.”

“When a person in Japan or China is caught up in a shoku, they are brought here. In the same way, *ranka* sometimes get swept into that other world. A *ranka* is like an embryo. In the other world, a *ranka* can become embedded in a woman’s womb. The child that is subsequently born is called a *taika*.”

“That’s what you’re saying I am?”

Rakujin nodded. “A taika is a being of this world, the way you appear now. It is the form bestowed upon you by the Tentei.”

“But when I was over there”

“If you had been born the way you are now, it would have caused quite an uproar. You do probably resemble your parents.”

“Yes. People say I look like my grandmother on my father’s side.”

“It is a shell, so to speak. A second skin grows within the womb so that those born in that other world may pass as ‘normal.’ I have heard of taika changing their appearance like this.”

Youko struggled to make sense of what he was telling her. He was telling her that in Japan, she had been a stranger in a strange land all along. That she accepted without objection. There was definitely a part of her that said, *Yes, of course.*

She didn’t belong to that other world. That was why she had never felt at home there. She found the thought very comforting. And at the same time, very sad.

Chapter 51

6-7 Youko was caught up in her thoughts for a moment, thinking about herself and her place in the world. She turned to Rakujin. “Are you a taika too, Professor?”

He shook his head and smiled. “Just an ordinary kaikyaku. I grew up in Shizuoka (静岡) and attended Tokyo University. I came here when I was twenty-two. I was trying to sneak out of Yasuda Hall (安田講堂) by crawling under one of the desks barricading the entrance. The next thing I knew, I was in this world.”

“Yasuda . . . ?”

“Do you know about it? It was a big deal at the time. Perhaps by now it has been consigned to the musty pages of history.”

“Just because I don’t know something”

“The same applies to me. It happened on January 17th, 1969. Night had fallen. What happened after that, I don’t know.”

“It all took place before I was born.”

A wry smile came to his face. “How the years have gone by. I have been here a long time.”

“You’ve been here ever since then?”

“I have. I arrived in Kei. Six years ago, I moved from Kei and settled in En. As for my line of work, I’m what you might call a science teacher.” He smiled and shook his head. “It’s not important. Now, what did you wish to ask me?”

Youko came right to the point. “There’s a way to go home, isn’t there?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Rakujin lowered his voice. “No mortal being can cross the Kyokai. It is a one-way trip. Once you get here, you cannot go back.”

Youko took a breath. “Is that so?” But it didn’t hit her as hard as she had expected.

“I’m sorry I could not be of more help to you.”

“No, that’s okay. I had another question. It’s a bit strange, though.”

“Go ahead.”

“I understand what they say here.”

Rakujin tilted his head to the side quizzically.

“At first, I didn’t notice any difference at all. I thought everyone was speaking Japanese. The only thing I didn’t understand were unique words and terms. And then I met this old kaikyaku in Kou, and for the first time, I realized that nobody was speaking Japanese. Yet I have no problem communicating, even though I only speak Japanese. What could account for this?”

Rakujin looked inquiringly at Rakushun. When Rakushun confirmed what she was saying, he thought it over for a minute.

“It would seem that you are not human.”

I knew that, Youko thought.

“When I arrived, it was hard because I did not understand a thing. I thought the language was similar to Chinese, but the few words of Chinese I knew did me little good. For many years, I had to communicate in writing. I managed to get by using classical Chinese. But even that was chancy, which made my first year here very difficult. That’s been true of everybody who has come here. Taika are no different. I have done my own research on kaikyaku, and every one of them has had real difficulty with the language. You are no ordinary kaikyaku.”

Youko unconsciously gripped her arms. Rakujin continued.

“From what I’ve heard, only wizards and magical beings do not encounter this hurdle of language. If you did not immediately perceive a difference in language, you cannot be human. You must be of the same species as wizards or youma.”

“So . . . there are also youma taika?”

Rakujin nodded. The smile did not disappear from his face. “I’ve never heard of it, but it is possible. Maybe there is a solution to your predicament after all. Perhaps you can go back.”

Youko lifted her head. “Do you really think so?”

“Perhaps. Youma and wizards can cross the Kyokai. It is not something I can do. I cannot go home again, but you are different. You should definitely request an audience with the Royal En.”

“If we meet with the king, would he be able to help us?”

“Most likely. It won’t be simple, and the rewards may be slim, but it would certainly be worth trying.”

“Yeah.” Nodding her head, Youko cast her eyes down to the floor. “It all makes sense. I’m not a human being.” She smiled to herself.

Rakushun raised his voice sharply. “Youko.” He drew back her sleeve, showing her right hand. “I find this most curious. There should be a scar in the palm of her hand, a wound she received when she came here and was attacked by the youma. It was a deep wound that went straight through her hand. Now, you can barely see it.”

Rakushun gently unfolded her hand and examined her palm. He quivered his whiskers. This was the wound Rakushun had tended to himself. He could testify to the fact that it was indeed a serious injury.

“She should have many other scars, but you’d never know it. The wounds themselves are very light for being inflicted by youma. No fang marks remain where she was bitten. For some reason, her body has become very resilient to injury.”

Youko had to smile. Listening on as her alien nature was acknowledged, it struck her as quite funny. “Because I’m a youma, don’t you see? That’s why they hunt me and attack me.”

Rakujin frowned. “Youma hunt you?”

Rakushun answered for her. “It sure looks that way to me.”

“That’s absurd.”

“That’s what I thought, but wherever Youko goes, youma are bound to show up. I was there when we were attacked by a kochou.” Rakujin pressed his hands to his temples.

“Recently, there have been rumors of youma appearing more often in Kou. Are you saying it is because of her?”

Rakushun looked hesitantly at Youko. Youko nodded and picked up the story. “I think so too. The reason I ended up here in the first place is because I was attacked by a kochou and had to escape.”

“You escaped to this world after being attacked by a kochou? From that other world to here?”

“Yes. A guy named Keiki—and I’m pretty sure he’s a youma too—he said it was in order to protect me. He’s the one who brought me here.”

“And where he is now?”

“I don’t know. When we arrived, we were ambushed by youma and got split up. I haven’t seen him since. He could be dead.”

Rakujin held his head in his hands and thought for a long time. “It’s impossible. I simply cannot imagine.”

“That’s what Rakushun said.”

“Youma are a species of wild animal. They have been known to hunt humans in packs, but they would not track down a particular individual. Needless to say, they would not cross the Kyokai to do so. It is not in their nature, the same way you would not expect it of a tiger, for example.”

“Couldn’t a person train a tiger to do something like that?”

“Youma cannot be domesticated. You are speaking of something quite grave, Miss Youko.”

“It’s that serious?”

“If we suppose that some kind of change was effected in the youma to cause them to attack you, or if we suppose that someone found a way to control and command them, either way, standing idly by and doing nothing could very well put the kingdom in jeopardy.”

Rakujin looked at Youko. “Now, if we supposed that you *were* a youma, that would simplify things greatly. I have heard of youma being separated from their packs. When they come close to starving, they are the kind of beast that will feed even upon their own kind.”

“Youko doesn’t look like a youma,” Rakushun said, and Rakujin nodded.

“There are people who have turned into youma, but I don’t think completely. Moreover, they are not conscious of it themselves.”

Youko smiled thinly. “That doesn’t mean it couldn’t happen.”

Rakujin shook his head. “No, you are different. You are no youma. It cannot be.”

With that, Rakujin stood up. “You should see the king at once. I am on speaking terms with some officials in the government, but it would be more expeditious for you to

go directly to Kankyuu. Visit Gen'ei Palace (幻英宮) straightaway and tell them exactly what you told me. You are the key to the whole thing. I'm sure the king will want to see you."

Youko also got to her feet. She bowed deeply. "I thank you very much"

"If you leave right away, you should arrive at the next city by nightfall. Do you have belongings at the inn?"

"No, we've got everything with us."

"In that case, I'll see you to the city gates."

Rakujin walked with them to the gates. "It may not amount to much, but I shall work on a formal petition as well. Until you figure out what is going to happen next, you may find yourself at loose ends as well, but once everything is put in order, I am sure the king will find a way home for you."

Youko looked at Rakujin. "And you?"

"What's that?"

"Do you also wish to petition the king to return to Japan?"

Rakujin smiled wryly. "I do not have the standing that would allow me to see the king. He is not some glad-hander who stoops to rubbing shoulders with run-of-the-mill kaikyaku."

"But . . ."

"No. If I pleaded, yes, perhaps he might deign to see me, but it is something I simply am not interested in pursuing."

"No interest at all?"

"I was tired of the times and was happy to come to this new world. I harbor no longings for my old country. By the time I understood that a way might be found to return if I petitioned the king, I had gotten used to living here and had lost any desire to go home."

"I still want to," Youko said to herself, feeling a strong stab of homesickness.

"Take care. I'll pray for your successful audience with the king."

"At the very least, we can speak Japanese on our way to the gates."

"There is no need." Rakujin laughed. "You see, that is the country I ran away from when I tried to start a revolution and failed."

Part VII

Chapter 52



Traveling the highway at a brisk pace, they made it to the next city just as the gates were being secured. The next morning they set off as soon as the gates opened. Youko still could not quite grasp the significance of what this was all about, but from the looks on the faces of both Rakujin and Rakushun, she knew it was serious.

She asked as they walked along, “I wonder if we’ll really be able to see the Royal En.”

Rakushun quivered his whiskers. “Indeed. I’ve never had an audience with a king, so I’m hardly in the position to say. I think asking to see the king out of the blue like this is not usually done.”

“Yeah, you think?”

“When traveling to Kankyuu, there are also the county and prefectural governments to deal with. We should probably ask for a meeting with the *Taiho* (台輔) first and see how that goes.”

“Taiho?”

Rakushun nodded, with his forefoot tracing the spelling of the Chinese character in the air. “It’s what the king’s counselor, or Saiho (宰輔), is called. A kind of honorary title. Kankyuu is in Sei Province (靖州), so the Marquis of Sei is the Taiho.”

Youko continued to stare at where Rakushun had written the characters in the air. She said, “That sounds familiar. I’ve heard that word before.”

“No doubt you have.”

“No, it was in the other world. A long time ago.” She thought about it, when and where she had heard someone say, “Taiho.” She said, “Oh, yeah, that’s it! That’s what they called Keiki.”

Rakushun blinked his black eyes in surprise. “Taiho? Keiki?”

“Yeah. He’s the guy who brought me here. He gave me this sword.” Youko laughed. “He kept going on about how he was my servant and that I was his lord and all. I’m telling you, he had this heavy-duty *attitude* about him.”

“Hold on a minute!” Rakushun frantically put up his hands and even with his tail dragged Youko to a stop. “*Keiki*, you said? They called Keiki the *Taiho*?”

“Yeah, I think so. What, do you guys know each other?”

Rakushun shook his head vigorously. His whiskers fluttered up and down in great agitation. “You are Keiki’s Lord . . .”

Man, it was so long ago, Youko thought to herself. She reached back through her memories like turning through the pages of a photo album. For a moment she was lost in

her thoughts. When she came back to herself and sighed, she saw that Rakushun had taken several steps back and was staring at her. He looked totally freaked out.

“Hey, what’s with you?” Youko tilted her head to the side, puzzled.

“What’s with me?” Rakushun said to himself. He looked up at her. “If your Keiki was addressed as *Taiho*, then that makes him the Kei Taiho.”

“And that is?”

The thunderstruck expression on Rakushun’s face was quite extraordinary.

“So Keiki is the Kei Taiho. Is there something wrong with that?”

Rakushun sat down on the shoulder of the road and motioned for Youko to join him. Youko sat down next to him. For a while, he just stared at her.

“So who is this Keiki? What kind of person is he?”

“This is really, really, *really* serious, Youko.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I’ll try to explain it to you. Keep calm and listen.”

Youko felt a growing sense of unease. She nodded and gave Rakushun her undivided attention.

“If I had known earlier that you were talking about the Taiho, the remarkable state of affairs we’ve found ourselves in could have been cleared up a lot earlier. You probably wouldn’t have had to suffer so much, either.”

“Rakushun, you’re not making any sense.”

“What I’m telling you is, the Taiho is a royal counselor. *The* royal counselor. And you say that his name is Keiki. That being the case, then he must be the Kei Taiho. There can be no other explanation.”

“Okay. So?”

Rakushun twitched his whiskers. He made as if to reach out with his forehand and touch Youko’s shoulder, but thought better of it and held back.

“That means he’s not a person. He’s not a youma. He’s a . . . *kirin*.”

“A kirin?”

“A kirin. A unicorn. The unicorn is the most exalted of the sacred beasts. He can take on the shape of a human being, but the Taiho is not a human being. He is always a kirin. *Keiki* (景麒) is written as the *Kirin* (麒麟) of *Kei* (慶). That is not his name, but his title. The kirin of the Eastern Kingdom of Kei, it means.”

“Right.”

“Kei is on the eastern coast of the Blue Sea. It is situated between En and Kou. It has a temperate climate. It’s a good place to live.”

“But isn’t it in the middle of a civil war?”

Rakushun nodded. “Last year the king died. A new king has not ascended the throne. The king subdues the youma, reigns in the supernatural forces, and protects the kingdom from disasters. So when there is no king, the country descends into chaos.”

“Right.”

“If Keiki called you Lord, then you are the King of Kei.”

“The what?”

“The King of the Eastern Kingdom of Kei. The Royal Kei.”

Youko was speechless with surprise. She could not find the words to respond.

“You are the chosen ruler of Kei.”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on a minute! I’m just an ordinary high school student. Okay, it looks like I’m a taika, but not some big, important person like that!”

“Every king is an ordinary person until he sits upon the throne. Our rulers are not chosen by heredity. To put it in simple terms, it has nothing to do with a person’s character or their outward appearance. A king is whomever the kirin chooses.”

“But, but, but”

Rakushun shook his head. “If *you* were chosen by Keiki, then you are the Royal Kei. The kirin takes orders from no one in this regard. Only the king does the kirin call Lord.”

“This is all *so* stupid.”

“The branch of a tree is bestowed upon the king by Heaven. The three fruits on the branch represent the earth, the kingdom, and the throne. The earth is the census and the registry of public lands. The kingdom is the rule of law. And the throne symbolizes the justice and benevolence of the king, meaning the kirin.”

As he spoke, Rakushun glanced down the road toward their destination. “You may be an ordinary person, an ordinary taika, but you have entered into the covenant with the kirin of Kei.”

“I’ve done what?”

“I don’t know the exact nature of the covenant, but a king is a god, not a person. From the moment you entered into the covenant with the kirin, you were no long a human being.”

Youko searched her memories. Her mind lit upon a memory. *Allow me*. “Yeah, Keiki did say something like: ‘Allow me.’ That’s it. Then he did something weird and I got this really strange feeling inside.”

Thoughts raced through her head. That *feeling*. And right afterwards, the window exploding, the shards of glass flying around the vice-principal’s office. Everybody was injured except for her, and not a scratch on her.

“Something weird?”

“He knelt before me, bowed . . . touched his forehead to my feet.”

“That was it, then,” Rakushun declared. “Kirin are dignified and aloof. They obey no one but the king, bend a knee to no one but the king.

“But”

“I am not the one to fill you in on the details. You should be asking the Royal En instead. I am nothing but a lowly hanjuu. I do not know anything about the Kingdom of Heaven.”

There was a hardness in his voice. He looked up at Youko. His whiskers wavered and drooped. “You are so far away from me, Youko.”

“I’m”

“If it is true, then I should not be the one telling you this. Youko, I should not even address you by your first name.” He got to his feet. “If we assume it is true, the faster we see the Royal En the better. Rather than heading to Kankyuu, it would be quicker if we reported in at the nearest municipal office. These are matters of the gravest importance.”

He was standing with his back to her. He turned to face her. “It has been a long journey and I know you must be tired. But rather than Kankyuu, I suggest we ask for asylum at one of the local government offices. Until we have received the official sanction of the Royal En, we should sojourn at a local inn, if you please.”

He bowed low to the ground. It was a pitiful sight.

Youko said, "I am who I am."

"That is indeed the truth."

"I . . ." Her voice trembled with rage. "I am who I've always been, nothing more! Not once have I ever been anything other than myself. Call me king or kaikyaku, that has nothing to do with me! Rakushun, *you're* the one I've come all this way with."

Rakushun continued to hang his head, showing his sad, rounded back.

"So what's different? Nothing's changed! I thought I was your friend. If becoming a king is going to change that, then I don't want any part of it!"

There was no answer from her small companion.

"Well, that's discrimination, pure and simple. You didn't discriminate against me because I was a kaikyaku. But now you do because I'm some sort of royalty?"

"Youko . . ."

"I'm not the one who's far away. It's your feelings that are. You and I are standing no more than two steps apart."

She reached out with her foot and crossed the distance between them. *No further than that*, she meant.

Rakushun looked up at Youko. He worried at the fur on his chest with his forefoot, fluttered his silky whiskers.

"Am I wrong, Rakushun?"

"It's three steps for me."

Youko couldn't help grinning.

"Forgive me." Rakushun reached out with his forefoot and touched Youko's hand. "I am sorry."

"It's okay. I'm the one who should be sorry. I got you mixed up in all kinds of weird stuff." She was being pursued. If Rakushun said she was a king then it was probably true. And her being chased probably had something to do with it.

Rakushun's black eyes brimmed with laughter. "I came to En for my own reasons, so it's nothing you need to blame yourself for."

"Oh, I've caused you no end of trouble."

"No trouble at all. If I thought you were trouble, I wouldn't have stuck with you from the start. If it was so disagreeable, I would have gone home."

"You even got injured on my account."

"I knew there would be difficulties, I knew there would be dangers. But I figured sticking with you would be worth it, so I stuck with you."

"You are a good person, Rakushun."

"I suppose. But I think I'm much better off heading into danger with you than playing it safe without you."

"Oh, c'mon. You didn't think things would get this chancy, did you?"

"In any case, my expectations were a bit uninformed. But that's my fault, not yours."

Youko couldn't think of a way to respond, could only nod. Holding his small hand, a feeling of complete acceptance welled up inside her.

Rakushun had likely committed a crime by giving shelter to a kaikyaku. The youma pursuing her may well have attacked Rakushun's home after she left. He had said to his mother when they left, "You're tough as nails, Mom. I'm sure you'll be okay on your own." There was no escaping the implication in his reassurances that her attackers or some other calamity might soon be visited upon his mother.

Youko pulled him to her and clasped the soft, furry body against her own. She ignored Rakushun's odd cries of protest and buried her head in the charcoal gray fur. It was as gentle and comforting as she imagined.

"I'm really am sorry for messing up your life like this. And really grateful."

"Youko."

She released the flustered Rakushun. "Sorry. I was a little overcome there."

"It's all right." Rakushun awkwardly combed his ruffled fur back into place. "But it'd be better if you acted with a bit more restraint."

"Eh?"

Rakushun's whiskers drooped. "It looks like we need to study you up a bit more about this world. You think?"

He spoke in a concerned tone of voice. With no real idea what he was referring to, Youko could only nod and say, "Yeah, sure."

Chapter 53

7-2 They stopped at the next city and got a room at an inn. As soon as Rakushun finished writing the letter, they rushed over to the municipal building.

If the letter was received, Rakushun said, a reply would be sent to the inn. Youko still was not convinced of the gravity of the situation. At the same time, she couldn't shake the feeling that she *was* a king. Consequently, she did not venture to stop Rakushun from doing what he was doing, and instead did as he asked with all due diligence.

"How long do you think it will take?"

"Hard to say. I've described our circumstances and requested an audience with the Saiho, but I have no idea how long it will take to get into his possession. At this point, we're dealing with something I have no experience with."

"Can't we go grab a bureaucrat and do a lot of begging and pleading?"

Rakushun laughed. "Do something like that and they'll throw us out on our butts."

"And what if they ignore us?"

"We'll keep on calling until they pay attention. This letter I'm sending gets straight to the point."

"Do we really have to go to all this bother?"

"I don't know of any other way."

"This is all a pain in the ass."

"We're talking about the real important big shots, here. It's their way or the highway."

"Huh."

Finding yourself in the eye of a hurricane certainly gave you a different view of things.

After leaving the municipal building—it was the local county ward building—instead of returning to the inn, Rakushun started off for the plaza. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see. I think you will find it quite interesting."

The municipal building was located in the heart of the city. It faced the town plaza. Rakushun headed across the plaza. Youko tagged along behind him, scratching her head

in confusion. Rakushun went to the front entrance of a white building. The alabaster stone walls were adorned with gold and richly-colored bas-relief engravings. The roof tile was a gorgeous blue enamel. The name of the city was Youshou. On the gates to the building was hung a framed sign that read “Youshou Shrine” (容昌祠). All the cities they had visited so far had such a shrine. It was the central civic institution.

“Here?”

“Here is it.”

“A shrine, it says. For worshipping God? The Tentei?”

“Once you see, you’ll understand.”

Rakushun gave her a reassuring smile. They went inside. Inside the gates were a pair of guards. “Just observing,” Rakushun said. They were asked for and presented their identification papers.

Through the gate was a narrow garden, and further on toward the heart of the shrine, a big building. The handiwork of the doors was exceedingly fine. Inside was a rotunda-like room. An air of tranquility suffused the interior of the building. The wide rotunda faced a wall. There was a large, square window in the wall. Through the window a courtyard was visible.

What looked like an altar completely encircled the window. Flowers and candles and offerings were piled upon the altar. At the altar, four or five couples faced the window, fervently praying.

They must be praying to something in the middle of the altar. But all that was there was the window. Was it something you could see from the window? From the windows you could see the courtyard, and in the center of the courtyard, a single tree.

“That is”

Rakushun reverently faced the altar and clasped his hands together. Then he took Youko by the hand. To the left and right of the walls, against which the altar was situated, were two wide corridors that lead deeper into the interior. From the corridor she could see the courtyard grounds covered with white pebbles. And what she saw in the midst of the courtyard took her breath away.

It was a white tree. When she had been wandering through the mountains, she had often sought the shelter of these strange trees. This tree was much bigger than those. It was no different in height, but was nearly twenty meters in diameter. At its highest point, it stood maybe two meters, and at its lowest, its limbs brushed the ground. The white branches bore neither flowers nor leaves. Here and there a ribbon was tied to a branch, and there fruits were ripening. The trees in the mountains bore rather small fruit in comparison. These were big enough to wrap your arms around.

“Rakushun, that is a”

“That is a *riboku*.”

“A *riboku*? Where the *ranka* grow?”

“That’s right. Inside each of those yellow fruits is a child .”

“Wow”

Youko gazed at the tree in amazement. She had surely never seen anything like it back in Japan.

“You see, when you were like that, there was a *shoku* and you were carried off to Japan.”

“I find it all hard to believe.”

The branches and the fruit had the luster of polished steel.

“A couple who wish to have a child come to the shrine. They make offerings and pray that a child will be entrusted to them. Then they tie a ribbon to a branch. If the Tentei grants the petition, a fruit grows on the branch where the ribbon is tied. The fruit ripens in ten months. When the parents come to pluck the fruit, it falls. After resting for a night, the husk of the fruit breaks, and the child is born.”

“So a fruit just can’t grow on its own. The parents have to petition first for it to happen.”

“That’s right. There are parents who are never rewarded, no matter how many times they ask. And parents who receive the gift almost at once. Heaven must determine whether or not they have the qualifications to raise a child.”

“It was the same with me? I had parents who tied a ribbon to a branch of the tree?”

“You did. And losing the ranka was certainly a profound disappointment to them.”

“Would there be any way to find them again?”

“I don’t know. A search of the records might reveal the answer. If you calculated the time at which you were swept away, and then figured out the time and place where such a shoku had occurred, and then investigated all the ranka that were swept away at the same time It’d be tough.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

She was struck with the desire to search out the people who had wanted her, see what kind of people they were. Finding the people who had prayed for her birth would finally confirm that this was her birthplace. Under normal conditions, she would have been born in a place like this, somewhere in this world, in the embrace of the Sea of Emptiness.

“Children look like their parents, don’t they?”

“Why would children look like their parents?”

Rakushun treated it like such an odd question that Youko had to grin. A human woman with a child who looked like a rat. There couldn’t be anything in the way of genetic inheritance going on there.

“In that other world, children resemble their parents.”

“Well, *that’s* different. Isn’t it a bit creepy, though?”

“Hard to say whether it is or not.”

“I guess it wouldn’t be that creepy if everybody in the same household resembled each other.”

“When you think about it, probably not.”

A young couple entered the courtyard. They consulted together, whispering while pointing at a branch. After a moment of indecision, they tied a thin, beautiful ribbon to the chosen limb.

“That ribbon is a design of their own making. While thinking about the child they wish born to them, they choose a design they think most felicitous and embroider it into the ribbon.”

“Oh.” It struck her as a most heartwarming custom. “When I was in the mountains, I saw trees like this.”

Rakushun glanced up at Youko. “Yaboku” (野木).

“They’re called yaboku? There was fruit growing on them too.”

“There are two types of yaboku. Yaboku from which plants and trees are born, and yaboku from which animals are born.”



Youko's eye widened in surprise. She said to Rakushun, "Even plants and trees and animals are born from these trees?"

Rakushun nodded. "But, of course. How else would anything be born?"

"Well, ah . . ." If children could be born from trees, it stood to reason that so could animals and plant life.

"Domesticated livestock come the riboku. Farmers petition the riboku for livestock on special days, following certain rules. In the wild, trees and plants and the beasts of the mountains reproduce on their own from the yaboku. Their fruits ripen on their own. In the case of trees and plants, the yaboku produces seeds. In the case of birds, the yaboku produces chicks. In the case of other animals, their young."

"Isn't it a bit risky for seeds and chicks and cubs to be born willy-nilly? You'd think a chick would soon become some other creature's dinner."

"The parents of animals also come to collect their offspring. Otherwise, until they can survive on their own, they live beneath the tree. That's why other creatures can't come close to the tree. Beasts who are natural enemies aren't born at the same time, and no matter how ferocious the animals might become, while beneath the tree, they never fight. People who fail to get to a city before nightfall will go into the mountains and search out a yaboku. It's always safe beneath a yaboku."

"That makes sense."

"In exchange, no matter how fearsome a beast cub might be grow up to be, it is absolutely forbidden to capture or kill one in sight of a yaboku.

"That being the case, I take it birds don't hatch from eggs."

Rakushun grimaced. "Who'd want to eat one with a chick inside?"

Youko laughed. "Yeah. I guess you wouldn't."

"Whenever I talk with you about such things, I get a weird feeling about that other world."

"I can see how. How about youma? I take it youma are also born from trees?"

"They are, naturally. Nobody has seen the tree from which youma are born, though. It's said that somewhere there are rookeries for youma. It would certainly be in such a place."

"Huh."

Youko nodded. She had other questions on the tip of her tongue, but they were of a more vulgar nature, so she thought better of asking them here. Like, exactly what kind of hanky-panky went on in the red-light district, that kind of thing.

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing. Thanks for bringing me here. I found it very rewarding."

Rakushun smiled broadly in return. "It looks like they're done."

The young couple in the courtyard again turned to face the tree, their hands entwined together.

Chapter 54

7-3 Rakushun had insisted that they take a room at a *proper* inn, and Youko had insisted that it was a waste of money.

"How could the Royal Kei even think of staying in a cheap place like this?"

“The only person saying I’m the Royal Kei is *you*. Because you’re my friend, for the time being, I’m taking what you’re telling me at face value. But at this point, nothing’s been carved in stone.”

“And if it were?”

“In any case, it doesn’t make any difference.”

“You know, Youko”

“Look, with the traveling money I’ve got, this kind of inn is within my means. We don’t know how long it’s going to take to get a reply from the government. If we move into some high-class place and the days drag on, we’ll be out of money before we know it.”

“You’re the Royal Kei. You shouldn’t even *have* to pay. To start with, what innkeeper would ever take money from a king?”

“Then better that we stay here. It wouldn’t be fair to take a room and then try to skip out on the bill. And I’m definitely not going to start freeloading off people.”

They ended up getting a room that could be said to be the best of the worst. It was a small, four tatami-mat (畳) room, about eight by ten feet. The room slept two. It had a window facing the courtyard. There was a small table beneath the window. As they were going Dutch on the room, this was the best inn Youko had stayed in so far.

It was dusk when they returned from the shrine. First off, she used the bath in the room, changed, and then washed her traveling clothes. Hot running water every day and a fresh change of clothes, she really was in hog heaven.

She went down to the dining hall where Rakushun was waiting, and they ate dinner. This wasn’t some meal where you stood and ate off a cart. This was a proper dining room, and eating there was a real luxury. She slowly drank her tea and was about to announce she was ready to go back to the room.

A scream came from outside the inn.

This was no normal scream. Youko at once reached for the sword. She hadn’t shed her habit of never being apart from the sword for even an instant. She grasped the hilt and sprang toward the door. The street was in an uproar. On the street corner across the way, people were running around in a great panic.

“Youko.”

“I don’t believe it. They’re here.”

She had believed that the youma would not chase her all the way to En. And now that she thought about it, there was no reason for her to think so.

In the first place, there weren’t many youma in En. Every night they got a room in an inn. They traveled only during the day, so it was natural that they wouldn’t run into any youma. But she shouldn’t have expected that her enemies would pursue her only in the mountains or only at night. Perhaps it was only good luck that had spared them so far.

“Rakushun, get back inside the inn.”

“But, Youko”

The screams of the fleeing people awakened something inside her. The most piercing of the cries, that was the sound of a person in mortal danger. Mingled together with the screams was that sound like a wailing baby. The cries of the youma. Youko knew it well.

She drew the sword, pressed the sheath into Rakushun’s hands. “Rakushun, get out of here. I’m begging you.”

He did not reply. She felt only his presence slip away from her side.

The flood of people surged closer. Youko spied in their midst a black shadow like a small mountain. It resembled a huge tiger. *Bakufu*, she heard somebody shout.

Youko lowered the point of the sword and positioned herself lightly on the balls of her feet. The steel blade glittered in the light from the adjacent shops. The tide of onrushing people parted to the right and left of her.

The tiger rushed on, mowing down the people in front of it. Behind the tiger was a huge creature that looked like a big bull.

“Two of them.”

She steadied herself. She felt that long familiar sensation with something more than fear. Exhilaration. The melee of people poured out the alleyways and piled into the shops around her. She spotted a gap between her two foes. She sprinted toward them, building up momentum, brought the sword to the ready.

First, the tiger. The huge beast bounded toward her as if to pounce. She ducked at the last second and drove the tip of the sword into its enormous head. She pulled out the sword, planted her feet, plunged it in again, and then spun around to face the charging blue bull.

Their bodies were so big, cutting them down to size was going to take some effort. But there were only two of them, so it wouldn't be too hard. She was giving herself some room to work with, sizing up the two of them, when Rakushun's voice echoed out.

“Youko! *Kingen!*”

Her eyes shot up. What looked like a flock of chickens was flying toward her. Ten, twenty, she couldn't tell how many.

“Don't let them sting you! They're poisonous!”

Youko clucked to herself in disgust. They were small, fast, and there were a lot of them. What a bloody pain in the neck. The birds' tails were shaped like ice picks. She struck down two and gave the tiger another should-be mortal blow.

To keep from tripping and falling, she skipped past the corpses and with her back against the wall of the inn, searched for better footing. She'd stuck the blue bull twice, and it was in a frenzy. The blood of the youma was making the cobblestones slick beneath her feet.

The cramped, poorly-lit alleyway, the birds gathering. No hope of assistance from the surrounding shops, save for the flickering lamplight. Beyond the muddy glow, the night was dark and deep. If the birds realized this as well, they were close at hand and could be scheming to fall on her out of the blackness.

She dodged around the rearing head of the blue bull, took out another bird. She heard a multitude of cries drawing closer, sounding like the creaking of rusty hinges.

“More of them . . .”

Cold sweat ran down her back. While she had been distracted by the birds, the still-not-dead blue bull had become her most immediate threat. She saw a hoard of monkeys streaming out of the mouth of the alleyway.

Her attention faltered for a moment. A moment later, a bird's razor-sharp scorpion tail was right in her face. She just managed to stumble out of the way and lost her balance. The next bird came at her, aiming straight at her eye. She knew she didn't have time to duck.

So, just how bad is this poison?

Forget about that, what about my eye?

Even if I can't see, I can fight.

I'm not going to get my arm up in time.

The thoughts raced through her head in no more than a split second.

Damn. This one's got me.

In the same instant that she closed her eyes, the bird diving toward her vanished. Someone had come in on her flank and clobbered the bird out of the sky. She didn't have the time to tell who.

The birds came at her and she slashed them to pieces. She sidestepped the charging blue bull. As she did, that same someone pierced the back of its skull with a brilliantly executed stroke. It was with such skill that the dexterity of the stroke completely distracted her. He yanked out the sword and eviscerated the next bird thrusting its stinger at her.

He was a big man, a good head taller than herself. "Don't let your guard down," he said, and dispatched the last of the birds with ease.

Youko nodded and he tore into the charging monkeys like a battering ram. From the rear, the tiger leapt at them and impaled itself. Youko quickly found herself back in the midst of the battle.

The man's skill far exceeded her own. His strength was an order of magnitude greater. The hoard was numerous, but the dead bodies piled up in the alleyway, and the tempest quieted down. It didn't seem to take much time at all.

Chapter 55

7-4 The man flicked the gore off his sword. He said, "You've got a pretty good arm."

He wasn't the least bit winded. He was a big man but not a giant. The picture of a gallant warrior. Youko looked up at him, still trying to catch her breath. He laughed.

"This might not be the most appropriate thing to ask, but you are all right?"

She nodded, weakly raising an eyebrow.

"Don't have the strength left to talk?"

"Thank . . . you . . . very . . . much."

"It's nothing you need to thank me for."

"Well, I certainly appreciate the help."

"Having youma wandering about is a nuisance. I didn't know I was coming to your rescue."

She was at a loss on how to reply. She felt somebody grab her tunic from behind. It was Rakushun. "Youko, are you okay?" Rakushun asked, stepping gingerly around the corpses beneath his feet.

She took the scabbard from him, wiped down the blade and sheathed the sword. "I'm okay. Are you injured?"

"I'm fine. Who's he?"

"Dunno," she said with a shrug.

The man only smiled. He indicated the building behind them. "Are you staying there?"

"Yeah."

Right, the man said to himself, glancing around the plaza. “People are coming. Do you drink?”

“No.”

“How about you?” he asked Rakushun.

A bit befuddled, Rakushun quivered his whiskers and then nodded.

“Well, then. Let’s get ourselves some refreshment. Explaining everything to the constables will be quite the bother, otherwise.”

With this, he turned and strode off. Rakushun and Youko looked at each other. Spontaneously, they both agreed and ran after him.

The man pushed his way through the gathering crowds and set off down the street. It didn’t look like he had a particular destination in mind, glancing here and there as he walked along the busy thoroughfare. Finally, he decided on an inn. It was a big, gorgeous place. Tagging behind, Youko and Rakushun followed after him inside without a second glance.

Youko glanced back at Rakushun. “What do we do now?”

“What do you mean, what do we do? What we did was come here.”

“That’s not what I mean. There’s a few things I want to talk over with this guy. Maybe you should go back to the inn, just to play it safe.”

“I’m not worried. Let’s go.”

Rakushun clambered up the stone steps and opened the door. Youko hurried to catch up. Inside the inn, the man and a waiter were waiting at the foot of the stairs. When he saw Youko, he smiled and climbed the stairs.

The waiter showed the man to a room on the third floor. It was a two-room suite with a balcony facing the courtyard. The room was big, the interior decor exquisite. Even the furniture was sumptuous. Youko couldn’t hide her trepidation. This inn was a higher class establishment than she had ever set foot in before.

The man ordered food and drink and sat down in a sofa-like armchair. He had the air of a person used to these surroundings. In the light of the countless candles, the fine cut of the man’s clothing was obvious as well.

“Um”

The man smiled at Youko, who was standing stock still in the doorway. “Why don’t you sit down?”

“Pardon me.”

Youko and Rakushun exchanged looks. They both sat down. But she found it hard to settle down. The man only smiled to himself at their apparent discomfort and said nothing else. Not knowing how to respond, Youko glanced around the room. The waiter returned with the victuals.

“Does the gentleman require anything else?”

The man waved his hand and the waiter left, closing the door behind him. “Would you like a taste?”

Youko shook her head, as did Rakushun.

“Um” Youko didn’t have the foggiest idea of how to begin the conversation. Sensing this, the man spoke first. “That certainly is a splendid sword you have there.” His attention focused on Youko’s right hand, he reached out his hand.

She hesitated for any number of reasons, but handed over the sword. He lightly gripped the hilt and drew the sword from the sheath. It came free without difficulty. Ignoring Youko's exclamation of surprise, he examined the scabbard and blade.

"The scabbard is dead."

"The scabbard is dead?"

"Have you seen strange visions in it?"

Youko raised her eyebrows. "Have I seen what?"

The man smiled at her startled reaction. He sheathed the blade and reverently handed the sword back to her. Youko wrapped her hand around the hilt.

"So, what is it?" she asked, meaning her question to be taken literally. "I mean, what kind of thing is it?"

The man nonchalantly picked up a pitcher and poured himself a glass of something. He seemed, however, to have lost a bit of his prior composure.

"That is the *Suiguu-tou* (水禺刀), the Water Monkey sword. The blade was smelted from water, the scabbard formed from a monkey. Hence, the Water Monkey sword. The champion who wields it possesses far more than a sword. When you see the glowing light and hear the sound of falling water, the sword shows you visions. If done properly, it will show you the past and the future, and what is far away from you. If you are inattentive to it, it will chatter on incessantly. The scabbard is there to bind its spirit."

Looking at Youko, he drained the glass. "The scabbard can change and turn into a monkey. The monkey can see into the hearts of people, and if care is not taken, it will confuse and bewilder the mind of its owner. That is why it is said to never separate sword and scabbard. It is the Imperial Regalia of the Kingdom of Kei."

Without thinking, Youko jumped to her feet.

"However, this scabbard is dead. Without the seal of the scabbard, the visions would certainly run wild."

"Who are you?"

"You sent a letter via the local ward office. So, tell me, what's this about?"

"You've got to be kidding. *You're* the Taiho of En?"

The man smiled slyly. "The Taiho is unavailable at the moment. But I'll listen to whatever you have to say."

Youko felt a profound disappointment. So he wasn't the Taiho after all. "I wrote it down in the letter."

"So you did. Something about the Royal Kei."

"I am a *kaikyaku*. I don't know much about this world. That's what it comes down to." Youko looked at Rakushun. "This is Rakushun. He says I'm the Royal Kei."

"Well," the man readily agreed, "he would be right, then."

"You believe him?"

"Believing has nothing to do with it. The *Suiguu* sword is the Imperial Regalia of Kei. Long ago, instead of destroying the most powerful and magical of the *youma*, they were subjugated and turned into this sword and scabbard, which became the crown jewels. Consequently, only their rightful owner can use them. Namely, the Royal Kei. That's because the one who first sealed them in the sword and scabbard was the King of Kei."

"But . . ."

“Because they were sealed together, only the true king can wield the sword. Because the scabbard is now dead, I can draw the sword. But even in my hands, the blade would not cut through one blade of grass. Nor would I see any of its visions.”

Youko looked straight at him. “Who the hell are you?”

He wasn't a normal guy, knowing what he knew about the Kingdom of Kei.

He said, “Could you tell me your name again?”

“Youko Nakajima.”

The man's gaze fell on Rakushun. “And the one named Chou Sei (張清) who sent the letter, that was you?”

“Yes,” said Rakushun, quickly correcting his posture and coming to attention. Chou Sei was his formal, given name.

“And your *azana* (字)?”

“Rakushun.”

“Yeah, and you are?” Youko glared at him.

The man wasn't intimidated. He gazed back at Youko without the slightest bit of defensiveness. “Komatsu Naotaka (小松尚隆).”

Youko pressed on with an equal bravado. “A *kaikyaku*?”

“A *taika*. The Chinese reading for my first name is Shouryuu (尚隆), which is more common. Though I'm afraid not common enough to be of much use to you.”

“And . . . ?”

“And what?”

“Who exactly are you? Are you the Taiho's bodyguard, or something?”

“Ah,” the man chuckled. “If my title is what you're after, then I am known as the Royal En. The King of the Kingdom of En.”

Chapter 56

7-5 Youko stood frozen on the spot. Rakushun's tail and whiskers shot straight up. Youko stared at the man. He laughed. He was clearly enjoying himself.

“The Royal En . . . ?”

“I am. I'm sorry the Taiho couldn't meet with you, but I thought I'd make myself useful. Will only the Taiho do?”

“No, no, that's okay,” said Youko, and couldn't think of anything more to add.

He smiled and dipped his finger in the wine glass. “Well, let's start from the beginning. One year ago, the Empress of Kei passed away. Posthumously, she is now known as the Late Empress Yo (予王). Were you aware of this?”

“No.”

The En nodded. “Her given name was Jokaku (舒覚). She had a younger sister named Joei (舒榮). You could say that Joei usurped the throne.”

“Usurped?”

“The king has a kirin. The kirin chooses the king. You know this?”

“Yes.”

“The Late Empress Yo left her kirin behind, Keiki. What do you know of him?”

“We've met. He's the one who brought me here.”

The En nodded again. “When the Late Empress Yo died, the throne was vacated. Keiki immediately began the search for a new king. Yet the announcement of the accession of the new king of Kei came only two months after the death of the Late Empress. I couldn’t help thinking this was in fact a *giou* (偽王).”

“A *giou*.”

The En took his finger from the wine glass and painted the characters on the tabletop. “A fake king, a pretender. The kirin chooses the king. A king who ascends the throne without the blessing of the kirin is a pretender. Felicitous omens should attend the accession of a new king. None accompanied Joei. Quite to the contrary, youma are on the rampage and locusts are swarming. Everything tells me this king is no king.”

“I don’t”

. . . *get it*, she was going to say, but the En held up his hand and stopped her.

“There was no doubt in my mind that we were dealing with a pretender. When I investigated further, I discovered it was in fact the sister of the Late Empress Yo who had claimed the throne. The sister of the Empress is an ordinary woman. She cannot enter the Imperial Palace, and consequently, cannot govern the country. I knew this was a serious matter.”

She didn’t follow well what he was telling her, but Youko opened her ears and listened.

“Regardless, she set herself up within the fortress of one of the province lords and from there proclaimed her enthronement. The ordinary citizens had no way of judging the truth for themselves. They had no reason to question her authenticity, rather, they were ready to believe. The province lords joined together, barricaded their castles, and announced that she, a commoner, would never enter as their equal. But the people believed her and blamed them. Joei even dared to declare war and solicited new officials and soldiers. She was met with a flood of enlistees.”

The En continued with a sullen expression. “The enthronement of the previous Empress took a long time, and her reign was short. The kingdom had not yet been able to recover, and the resentment of the peasants against the province lords was deep. Of the nine provinces, already two are ruled by pretenders, and three more have been toppled by their armies.”

“Has no one been able to refute her claims?”

“Some have tried. When the province lords pointed out the absence of the kirin, Joei insisted that *they* were hiding him. But then he was produced by Joei, making their position untenable. The presentation of the kirin in its creature form made it hard for anyone to question her or to rescue Keiki. And with that, of the four remaining provinces, two more switched sides.”

“They produced Keiki. Then Keiki”

“It seems he was captured.”

That’s why he hadn’t come to rescue her. It wasn’t the worst thing that could have happened, but it was damned near close.

Rakushun said, “So this Joei has been sending assassins after Youko.”

“It’s not possible. You’re talking about youma attacking people. That does happen. But singling out, pursuing and attacking a specific person, that does not. Were they *shirei* (使令), though, then it becomes another matter, entirely.”

“Shirei?”

“The king employs the special powers of the Imperial Regalia, and the kirin commands the *shirei*. If someone were commanding the youma to attack a specific person, it could only be a kirin.”

So the youma that surrounded Keiki were under his command. That’s what Youko took from the explanation, but Rakushun’s reaction was one of extreme agitation.

“It can’t be!”

The En nodded, a grave look upon his countenance. “No, it should not be. But I can think of no other explanation. It was by means of the kirin’s *shirei* that the wild youma were sent to attack the Royal Kei.”

“It’s just”

“When I think this through logically, I conclude that Joei has neither the resolve nor the resources to raise and maintain an army. There must be someone behind the scenes pulling the strings. If that someone is also sending forth the *shirei*, then turn that rock over and you should find a king there.”

Youko looked back and forth between Rakushun and the En. “Meaning?”

The En asked, “Do you know what kind of a being a kirin is?”

“The sacred beast that chooses the king”

“Yes, it is. But a kirin is not a magical creature like the youma. Closer to a god. It has the heart of a beast, but can take upon a human appearance. Its whole being is suffused with charity and compassion. It is aloof and detached, but it cannot abide conflict. In particular, it has a horror of blood. The stain of blood makes it ill. It will never take up the sword and fight. It has the *shirei* to protect itself. The *shirei* are youma, though youma that have covenanted with the kirin and become what you might call its servants. In no wise would they ever take it upon themselves to attack a human being. To do so would be contrary to the kirin’s will.”

“And yet?”

“And yet, the king is the kirin’s lord. Though the kirin bears no malice toward any person, if the king commands it, that changes everything. The *shirei* attacked you because the king ordered the kirin to do so. Nothing else is possible.”

“Could this Joei have *tamed* a kirin?”

“No. There is but one kirin in a kingdom. The king is its lord, the king searches it out, but nothing beyond that.”

So that meant a king had put a price on her head. Then she remembered, the woman on the mountain road. She had watched her mourn the death of the youma. Was it because those youma had been her *shirei*? The parrot had commanded her to kill Youko. Weeping, unable to defy him, she had brandished the sword. If that parrot was the king, and that woman a kirin . . . the pieces of the puzzle began to fall together.

“But whose kirin?” *And what king of what kingdom?*

The En stared off into the distance. “The answer will become apparent soon.”

“But”

“As long as you are within our custody, no one will lay a finger upon you. The problem for your enemies is that Keiki, even in the form of a kirin, is not so easily disposed of. Were the kirin murdered, the king who ordered your assassination would be quickly revealed. Heaven could not overlook such an injustice.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Better to leave it alone for now. With the kingdom on the wane, who is giving the orders will become clear.” With that, the En laughed heartily. “Keiki is being held in Kei. That alone would justify a rescue mission. In order to do so, and in order to protect your Highness, we must get you to a safe place. Shall we be going?”

“Right now?”

“As soon as possible. If you have belongings at the inn, there’s just enough time to go fetch them. I’d like to take you to my place.”

Youko look at Rakushun. Rakushun nodded. “You’d better get going, Youko. That is the safest way.”

“But . . .”

“Don’t worry about me. Go.”

The En smiled at Rakushun’s admonition. “Another guest is hardly going to complicate things any further. It’s kind of a dilapidated old place, but I’ve got rooms to spare.”

“You—you can’t be serious!”

“Keep in mind that I’m an utter incompetent when it comes to housekeeping, but it you don’t mind, then you’re welcome. I think the Royal Kei would be more at ease with you there as well.”

His home was none other than Gen’ei Palace. Privately shocked that the En would refer to it like some broken-down hut, Youko said to Rakushun, “C’mon, let’s go. I wouldn’t feel good about leaving you behind.”

Rakushun nodded stiffly.

Chapter 57

7-6 When the En arrived at the outskirts of the city, he put his fingers to his mouth and sounded a high whistle.

Walking all the way to Kankyuu would take another month. Moreover, at night, there was no getting in or out of the city. Youko was trying to figure out how in the world he was planning to get to Kankyuu when, seemingly in response to the whistle, a shadow appeared above the wall. She could make out the glowing forms of two tigers. The play of light on their coats turned their black stripes an iridescent white, not as pale as pearl, not as impenetrable as a slick of oil. Their impressive eyes were like black opals, their tails magnificently long.

As on that very first night when she had crossed the Kyokai, she climbed onto the tiger. They flew into the night sky, a half moon rising and turned toward Kankyuu.

She felt a deep nostalgia. Looking back at it now, how much time had passed since then? She had ridden on one of Keiki’s shirei, by the name of Hyouki. When they had headed out over the ocean, it was still cold. The Youko then didn’t understand a thing, not about Keiki, not about herself.

Now it was summer. The heat rested like a blanket on the night, the air around them so still as to seem melancholy.

Just as on the night she had crossed the Kyokai, as the beast galloped through the sky, the nightscape opened up below them. The nights in En were bright, the villages and hamlets twinkling like small constellations of stars. It reminded her of the Kyokai.

“Youko, there is Kankyuu.”

Seated behind her, clinging to her back, Rakushun pointed with his small forefoot off into the distance ahead of them, at a location perhaps another two hours away. She saw nothing in the direction Rakushun had indicated. There wasn't a city there, only the deep blackness. *Where?* she was going to ask, when she understood what it was she was looking at. Rakushun wasn't pointing out something *within* the darkness, he was pointing at the darkness itself.

“I don't believe it”

Bathed in the light of the half moon, the world below was the dark color of the ocean. The contours of the forests had a faint white glow, like waves, dotted with a countless number of lights.

Within the nightscape was a deep, black hole.

No, not a hole. It was a silhouette, the moon rising up behind it. What had gouged a hole in the nightscape below looked like a hole, but was in fact the rising shape of a . . .

“ . . . a mountain.”

Could such a mountain exist?

They were so high already that the villages appeared as no more than dots. Even so, she found herself looking up and up.

A mountain that reaches to heaven, Rakushun had said.

But can a mountain really reach to heaven? For a moment, she had the feeling of being a very small, insignificant speck of life.

A soaring mountain like the pillars penetrating heaven and earth. The shape of the mountain, rising abruptly from the hilly countryside and projecting upwards toward the sky, looked like a bundle of calligraphy brushes of different lengths stood on end. The narrow, steep summit of the mountain was shrouded with clouds that hid it from view.

The sheer rock face creating such a silhouette was more like an enormous wall.

“That's Kankyuu? That mountain?”

Comparing the tiger's legs against the mountain, they were still an unbelievably long way off. That's how big this mountain was.

“That is Kankyuu Mountain. Such a mountain is home to the royal palaces in all the kingdoms. The palace is at the very summit.”

The light of the moon gleamed faintly on the outlines of the rising cliffs, so pointed as to come close to the vertical. She searched for the familiar shape of a castle, but with the summit hidden in the clouds, she could be sure of nothing. At the base of the mountain, she saw one or two points of light.

“Those lights are the city of Kankyuu.”

“If it was the capital, it must be bigger than Ugou.” They must be so far away that the lights were all she could see of the city.

Youko was momentarily overcome with surprise. Even at the rate the beast was flying, Kankyuu was not close enough to seem to be moving. Slowly, the mountain drew nearer, such that she could not take the entire mountain into view without turning her head, nor could she clearly see its summit. At last, she could see the outlines of the city of Kankyuu.

The city rose up around the base of this absurdly high mountain, spreading out in an arc over the gently rolling terrain. Lying in the shadow of a mountain so gigantic, the nights must be very long indeed.

When she asked Rakushun, he confirmed that it was so. "I went once to the capital of Kou, Gousou, and that's what it was like. Because Gousou is to the east of the mountain, the twilight lasts a long time."

"Huh."

Seen from above, Kankyuu was a large city. A sea of light spread out beneath them. And before them, as far as the eye could see, the cliffs. The bare, treeless layers of stone that made the narrow, vertical mountain looked chalky in the dark.

Up ahead, the En had alighted on a rocky ledge projecting from the side of the cliff.

The landing area was about the size of a tennis court. The level area had apparently been hewn from a larger mass of rock. Following the En, the tiger Youko and Rakushun were riding set down on the ledge.

Grinning, the En glanced back over his shoulder at them. "Looks like you made it here without falling off."

How could you fall off? Youko wondered. On the back of the tiger, there was no sense of cutting through the wind, no shaking from side to side.

As if reading her thoughts, the En smiled. "The height makes some people dizzy. Others get so used to the sensation they fall asleep."

Well, I suppose, Youko thought sarcastically.

Intricate designs were carved deeply into the smooth landing area, like anti-skid marks. There were no handrails, and she had no urge to peer over the edge. She couldn't begin to imagine how far above the ground they already were.

A pair of doors led from the ledge into the cliff. The En turned on his heels and headed toward the doors. The doors both swung inwards before he arrived.

The doors were twice her height and seemed to have been fashioned from a single slab of stone. As heavy as the door looked, they were opened by a pair of soldiers. She wasn't positive that they were soldiers. But as they both wore thick leather breastplates, it seemed a logical conclusion.

After nodding to the soldiers, the En looked back at Youko and Rakushun, beckoning them to follow along. When they passed through the doors, the two soldiers bowed, but not deeply, and then hurried out onto the ledge where the two tigers were resting. They were probably going to water and feed and groom them as they would a pair of horses.

"What's holding you up? This way." The En was looking at her. She hurried to catch up and found herself within a large hallway.

The chandelier overhead made the room as bright as day. Fluttering his whiskers in amazement, Rakushun stared up at the ceiling. So it must be something pretty unusual.

The hall wasn't long, leading to a much less impressive room. From there, in the middle of a tunnel-like arch, a white stone staircase continued on upwards. Seeing the staircase, Rakushun's whiskers drooped.

The En glanced back and said encouragingly, "Come on. No need to worry about courtesies."

“Not at all.” Rakushun had a stiff expression on his face that Youko understood at once. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “You know, Youko, I think this is how we get up there.”

“Yeah, probably.” The thought left her in a less than enthusiastic mood as well. The ledge they had landed on was quite high up, but the distance that remained from here to the summit was comparable to a skyscraper. Walking up all that way would be torture.

Nevertheless, Youko kept her thoughts to herself and stepped onto the staircase. She took hold of Rakushun’s hand. The rise of each step was short, but the staircase itself was long. They climbed the stairs in step with the En. Where the stairs ended there was a large landing. They turned ninety degrees and climbed another flight of stairs and entered a small room. At the back of the room was a door. The thick, wooden door was beautifully adorned with vivid *bas-relief* carvings.

Passing through that door, a soft breeze drifted in, carrying with it the rich scent of the sea.

“Oh . . .” Youko unconsciously exclaimed. Before them was a wide terrace. They were already above the clouds.

What miracle this was, she didn’t know, but ascending those few steps had brought them already to the very heights of the mountain. The floor was finished in white stone, as were the balustrades of the terrace. Beneath the terrace, waves of white clouds broke against the shore.

No, Youko realized in astonishment, they were the whitecaps of actual waves.

“Rakushun!” she shouted, “it’s an ocean!”

She ran to the railing. Beneath her feet, where the terrace protruded from the face of the cliff, the tall waves crested and broke. As she cast her eyes about, she knew this was the surface of an ocean and where the smell of the sea came from.

“There is an ocean above the sky,” said Rakushun.

Youko glanced back at him. “An ocean above the sky?”

“Well, if there weren’t an ocean, then we wouldn’t call it a Sea of Clouds.”

The rich smell of the ocean mingled together with the wafting breezes. The black sea reached out as far as she could see. Waves crashed against the shore beneath the terrace. Leaning out over the railing and peering down into the water, she could see lights in the depths of the sea. It was like the *Kyokai*, but then she realized that these were the distant lights of *Kankyuu*.

“This is so cool. But why doesn’t the water all just fall down?”

“Well,” said the En, with a chuckle, “if the Sea of Clouds were to fall like rain, that would cause quite a bit of trouble for everyone. If it would please her Highness, I’m sure we could arrange a room with a balcony for the Royal Kei.”

“You know,” said Youko, trying to put this as politely as possible, “I would really appreciate it you could stop it with this ‘Highness’ stuff.”

Amused, the En raised an eyebrow. “And why is that?”

“I guess it seems like you’re talking about somebody else.”

The En laughed. He was about to say something, then suddenly looked up at the sky. Following the direction of his gaze, Youko saw a slender beam of light.

“It looks like the *Taiho* has returned. Well, then, Youko.”

He turned around. At the left-hand side of the veranda was a short stone staircase. Youko followed after him, stepping where he stepped. She looked up in amazement.

There, arranged upon an island-like formation in the center of the craggy mountain, its cliffs white in the light of the moon, were a countless number of buildings. Like in a scene depicted in a sumi-e watercolor, the ranges of curiously-shaped rocks, the branches of trees and shrubs protruding from the bare rock, the many narrow waterfalls.

Some of the buildings on the cliffs were pagodas, others had multiple stories. Corridors running in all direction connected them together, creating one massive structure. It was an enormous castle embedded within the mountain itself. The heart of the Kingdom of En. The residence of the Royal En. Gen'ei Palace.

Chapter 58

7-7 Youko and Rakushun entered the building and were surrounded by a number of what they took to be servants. They were separated from the En and hustled off to rooms further inside.

“Hey,” said Youko.

“Wait a minute,” said Rakushun

A lady-in-waiting turned to the flustered Youko and Rakushun and said with an impassive expression on her face, “Please follow me. A change of clothes shall be made available. Your baths are being drawn.”

In other words, they were not to be wandering around the palace in such an unkept state. Despite their confusion, they agreed. They were brought buckets of water and scrubbed themselves down. After that, behind a set of folding screens, took turns soaking in the bath. When they went into the next room, they found new clothes laid out on a big table.

“This is what I’m supposed to change into?”

Youko held up the florid fabric with a look of disgust. Rakushun inspected it. “Seems to be men’s clothing. Maybe he thinks you’re a man, or he knows you’re a woman, and he’s having a little fun with you.”

“Looks like there’s a suit for you too,” Youko pointed out.

Rakushun’s shoulder slumped. “Yes, it should have occurred to me before, but I guess it would be considered rude to show up like this.”

In other words, *naked*, Youko thought, handing him his clothes. She recalled the hanjuu she’d seen on the streets. More than a few of them were wearing clothes. As put out as Rakushun looked, when she imagined him dressed up like that, she had to smile.

His shoulders rounded, dragging his tail, she sent Rakushun off behind the folding screens while she changed her clothes. The trousers had an ample cut and were made of a soft, pale fabric, as was the blouse. A long, finely-embroidered tunic finished up the ensemble.

Everything was made out of silk. After becoming used to plain clothing scratching against her skin, it was ticklish. About the time she had finished tying the sash, the door opened and an old man appeared.

“Have you finished with your wardrobe?”

“I have. I think my friend . . .”

. . . *needs some more time*, she started to say, when the screens moved. “It’s okay,” he answered in a low voice. “I’m done.”

Youko gaped at the figure that appeared from behind the screens. For a moment, she was at a loss for words.

“What?”

“Rakushun, that is . . . you?”

“Sure is.” He nodded and grinned. “The first time you’ve seen me like this. But I’m still Rakushun.”

Youko put her hands up to her face in mortification. Now she understood what Rakushun meant when she hugged him, and he said that she needed to learn some “discretion.”

“I forgot that this might not have figured into your sense of things.”

“I’d say it didn’t.”

He laughed, a handsome man of twenty or so, of average height and somewhat thin. But in any case, a healthy young man. A “legal adult” really did mean a *human* who had come of age.

“An ordinary animal couldn’t talk, right? I said I was a *hanjuu*, right?”

“Yeah . . . you’re right.”

She felt her face burning. A *hanjuu*, a *half-human*, he had said. A legal adult, he had said. But she hadn’t been paying attention. They’d shared rooms together, and once upon a time, he had undressed and dressed her.

“Youko, just when you seem to have it all together, you can still completely miss the big picture.”

“I think so too. So why aren’t you always in human form, then?”

Rakushun sighed despite himself. “Because it’s a lot easier being a rat,” he said, an air of resentment in his voice. His vermilion-clad shoulders sagged disconsolately. “I’m telling you, dressing up like this is a real pain in the neck. My shoulders are so stiff. And to makes things worse, on a highfalutin day like today.”

He complained so miserably that Youko had to giggle.

The old man accompanied them down a long hallway and into a large room. The scent of the sea drifted in through a pair of open French windows. The En glanced over his shoulder at them. He was standing on the terrace, facing the water. He had changed as well, but there wasn’t much difference among their outfits. Youko and Rakushun were by no means wearing *haute couture*, so the king’s clothes seemed rather plain considering his stature.

The En grinned as he came back into the room. “I see you’ve dressed. My attendants insist on sticking to formalities. It is annoying, but they get quite upset when you don’t do exactly as you’re told. I do apologize.”

Youko thought perhaps it was the En who was underdressed, but his tone was charming enough that Youko refrained from smirking in response to his apology.

“Rakushun, you want to take all that off, it’s okay with me.”

Rakushun (the young man) managed a strained smile. “It’s nothing to be concerned about. What about the Taiho?”

“He’ll be here any minute.” As he spoke, the door opened. The scent of salt air filled the room. “Speak of the devil.”

There was a pair of screens inside the doors. The personage who appeared from behind them was a golden-haired boy of twelve or thirteen.

“How did it go?”

“As expected, clear sailing all the way to the palace. Interesting guests you have.”

“Actually, they’re not my guests. They’re yours.”

“Mine? Never met them before.” The boy scowled and turned to Youko and Rakushun. “So, what’s with you two?”

“Now, now, you can be nicer than that.”

“You know what it means to mind your own business?”

“You’re going to regret it.”

“So, you finally decided to get yourself a better half, huh?”

“I’m not kidding.”

“Your mother, then?”

“And if she is neither my wife nor my mother, will you remember your manners, then?” The En sighed and turned to the dumbfounded Youko. “I’m sorry, but this is Enki (延麒), an incorrigible little cuss. And Rokuta (六太),” he said, addressing Enki, “this is her Royal Highness, the Empress of Kei.”

Enki gulped audibly, took a very big step backwards and peered up at her. Youko tried but couldn’t help herself and burst into laughter. It was perhaps the first time she had truly laughed out loud since crossing the Kyokai.

“You should have said so in the first place! What a bastard!”

“Takes one to know one,” the En said. “Her companion is Sir Rakushun.” He grew more serious. “How are things in Kei?”

The boy sobered up as well. “It looks like Ki Province (記州) has already fallen.”

Rakushun wrote out the character for “Ki.” Even though everything was automatically translated for her, she still had to attend to how things were written. The spoken language wasn’t a problem, but that alone wasn’t enough to make her literate.

“Only the northern province of Baku (麦州) remains. Joei resides in Sei Province (征州), as she has all along. Her armies grow, but they can’t match the might of our Imperial Army (王の軍).

Rakushun wrote “Imperial Army” using the characters, *The Royal Masters of War* (王師).

“The pretender’s army is advancing on Baku Province. The Marquis of Baku has three thousand soldiers under his command. He can’t hold out for long. It’s only a matter of time.” He sat himself down on top of the table and helped himself to some fruit. “So where’d you find the Royal Kei, anyway?”

The En gave him the abridged version. Enki listened silently and then leaned forward and said with sullen expression, “What kind of fool would assault a kirin?”

“For the time being, we can leave aside the question of who is pulling the strings. But we’ve got to get Keiki back.”

“The sooner the better. Once they realize the Royal Kei is here, they may kill him.”

“Excuse me,” Youko interrupted. “But I don’t understand any of this.”

The En raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

“Look, I was brought here totally in the dark. The Royal En says I’m the Empress of Kei, so I guess it must be true. Just as it’s true that some king somewhere obviously wants me dead. But I never wanted to be the Royal Kei. It’s not like anybody gave me a heads up beforehand, you know, said how they’d really like me to consider being their next Queen, or something. I don’t much care for getting chased around by youma, and I

didn't particularly enjoy getting chased around by those soldiers in Kou, either. The only reason I'm here is to ask The Royal En for a way to get back to Japan. That's it."

The En and Enki looked at each other. For a while, everybody was silent. Then the En spoke up.

"Youko, have a seat."

"I"

"Sit down. There's something I'd like you to hear, and it's going to take a while."

Chapter 59

7-8 The En stared off into space for a moment. Then he said, "There are people and there are kingdoms. So it stands to reason that there must be people to govern those kingdoms, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes."

"This palace is where the king resides. The king administers the affairs of state. As this responsibility falls upon the shoulders of the king, he must administer the government in accordance with the wishes of the people. Of course, power corrupts, and oftentimes the king ends up oppressing his subjects. I'm not saying that all rulers are by definition bad. But from the time the king takes up the reins of power, he is no longer an ordinary person. And what he knows of being an ordinary person slips away."

"I've heard it said that the Royal En is an enlightened monarch."

The En smiled wryly. "That is beside the point. The point is, when kings oppress their subjects, what recourse do the people have?"

"There's always democracy," Enki interjected. "The people choose a king to their own liking. And when he becomes not to their liking, they choose somebody else."

"Well, that's one way," the En responded. "But here, it is done another. If a king is oppressing his subjects, then someone chooses a king who won't. That someone is the kirin."

"The kirin chooses the king on behalf of the people?"

"That's one way to put it. Here, there is what may be called the Divine Will. God in His Heaven created the earth and the kingdoms and established the natural law. According to the Divine Will, the kirin chooses the king, and the king, in turn, receives the Mandate of Heaven."

"Mandate of Heaven."

"The king protects the kingdom, comes to the aid of the commoners, and maintains law and order. The kirin selects those capable of carrying out that Mandate. Those chosen are placed upon the throne. The result is that by means of the kirin, Heaven enthrones wise rulers. There are those who call me an enlightened monarch, but that is hardly true. All kings possess the character and capability to reign with wisdom, strength, and benevolence."

Youko didn't respond. She sat there quietly.

"Still, many enlightened monarchs have reigned in Japan and China. So why is it that these countries have not, in general, remained at peace?"

Youko nodded slightly. "Even if a person is a so-called enlightened monarch, he can go astray in a moment of weakness. And even if he doesn't, the best ruler will die

someday, and the person who succeeds him will not necessarily be so wise. So it's inevitable that you'll eventually end up between some kind of rock and hard place."

"That's right. But if a monarch were made immortal, made a god, that would solve half the problem. And then supposing the king does die, better that you eliminate hereditary rule, requiring the kirin to choose a new king and watch him very carefully to make sure he doesn't stray. Do you think that would work?"

"Yeah, I suppose that would work."

As if in agreement, the En nodded once. "For the present time, the Kingdom of En has been entrusted to me. Enki chose me as king. The selection process has nothing to do with how hard a person wishes to be king or strives to be a ruler. The kirin relies on his intuition, the way a man decides upon a woman. Or perhaps I should say, the way a woman chooses a man. I was a ranka. I was not born here. Like you, I had not the slightest idea of what a king was or should be. Yet the kirin chose me, and so a king I am. The Mandate of Heaven rests upon my shoulders, and nothing I can do can change that."

"Does that mean I can't go home, either?"

"You may, if you wish. But you are still the Empress of the Eastern Kingdom of Kei. That calling you cannot repudiate."

Youko's head slumped.

"The kirin covenants with the chosen king. Thereafter, the kirin will not divorce himself from the king. It is an unbreakable compact of obedience. After the king takes the throne, the kirin stands by him as his prime minister."

"Enki too? He's the prime minister?"

Youko looked at the boy sitting cross-legged on the table. The En chuckled. "Looks can be deceiving. You might not be convinced by looking at him, but kirin are, by nature, beings of justice and mercy."

Enki scowled. The king smiled. "You will find nothing in the counsel of the Taiho but words of justice and mercy. But justice and mercy alone cannot govern a kingdom. There are times when I have gone forth when Enki said to pull back, when I have acted ruthlessly and without mercy. It is, at times, what the righteous ruler of a kingdom requires. If I adhered to every word Enki spoke, the kingdom would fall to pieces."

"Yeah . . . I suppose."

"For example, imagine there is a criminal, a man who murders for money. And let us imagine that this man has a hungry wife and child. In such a case, Enki would tell me to spare the rod. But to leave criminals at large would make the kingdom unmanageable. Regrettable though it may be, the man must be convicted for his crimes."

"Sure . . . I guess."

"On the other hand, let us suppose that I ordered Enki to execute the criminal. A kirin has not the disposition to do such a thing, but, in the end, protesting all the while, he would carry out the order. Enki must obey me. Must. A kirin cannot oppose the will of the king. Even if I were to order him to kill himself—if, in fact, such an order could be given—he would not disobey."

"So, you're saying that after you're chosen by the kirin, you can pretty much do what you want?"

"Therein arises the hard part. It is the Divine Will of Heaven that a king rules righteously. Heaven's desire is that the kingdom be governed with justice and mercy. Heaven's proxy in this regard is the kirin. However, as I said, a kingdom cannot be

governed by justice and mercy, alone. There are times when you must be unjust, must act without mercy. But only to a certain degree will Heaven turn a blind eye.”

Youko simply looked at him.

“You may act ruthlessly for the good of the kingdom, but only to a point. Go past that point and the king will lose the right to rule. After all, the throne was given to him by Heaven. And when a king strays too far and loses the Mandate of Heaven, the kirin falls ill. This illness is called *shitsudou* (失道), or the Loss of the Way.”

The En wrote the characters in the air. “When the king strays from the Way, the kirin will suffer. At that point, the wise king mends his ways. If he does not, the kirin will not recover. But it is not enough for the kirin to simply persevere. The problem is one of character, the same as with all those people who promise to change their ways and do not. There are few cases of kings who were able to remedy the situation after a kirin was struck down with the *shitsudou*.”

“And what happens if he can’t?”

“Then the kirin will die. And if the kirin dies, so will the king.”

“Dies”

“Human life is short. The king does not age, does not die, because his name is recorded in the Census of Heaven. Kings are immortal because they are gods. But it is the kirin that makes the king a god. So if the kirin dies, so does the king.”

Youko nodded.

“Aside from the king returning to the Way, there is one other way for the kirin to be cured of the *shitsudou*.”

“And that is?”

“That is, for the king to release the kirin from the covenant. The simplest method is for the king to end his own life. If the king dies first, the kirin will not.”

“And the kirin will help him do so?”

“So he will. That is what Keiki did.” The En took a breath. “The Late Empress Yo was by nature human, and human beings are by no means perfect. She became romantically attached to Keiki. She would not allow any women to associate with Keiki. She paraded herself around as his wife, grew insanely jealous. In the end, she went too far, expelled all women from the palace and tried to drive all women from the kingdom. And when Keiki protected them, she tried to have those who remained killed. At that point, Keiki fell ill.”

“And . . . ?”

“The late Empress parted from the Way because of her romantic attachment to Keiki. The prospect of being the cause of his death could not be pleasing to her. In some small way, she had not fallen so far as to be beyond reason. So the Late Empress Yo climbed Mount Hou and there, renounced the throne. Heaven accepted her abdication, and Keiki was emancipated from her.

“What happened to her?”

“That royal part of her died, and what made her a god was reversed. No longer a monarch, she could no longer continue to live.”

And so the Empress Jokaku of the Kingdom of Kei had passed away.

“You have already been chosen by Keiki as the next king. To accede to the throne, you must ascend Mount Hou and accept the Divine Decree. However, no significant distinction should be made between the covenant and accession to the throne. The

Mandate of Heaven has descended. You are the Empress of Kei. Nothing you can do will change it. Do you understand?"

Youko nodded.

"The king has the responsibility to govern the kingdom. You may, if you wish, cast your kingdom aside and return to Japan. A kingdom abandoned by its monarch will fall into chaos. When that happens, make no mistake, Heaven will cast you aside as well."

"And Keiki will be struck down with the *shitsudou* and die."

"Most likely, yes. But it is not so simple as that. Think about the subjects of your kingdom as well. A king does not only rule. He also bears the responsibility of reigning in the natural forces and the *youma*. The *youma* run rampant. Tempests storm. There are droughts and floods and epidemics. The hearts of men are confused. When the realm falls to ruin, there are no words on the lips of the people but those of suffering."

"Falls to ruin?"

"Yes. It took Keiki a long time to find the Late Empress Yo, and the throne was vacant for an extended period. In that time, the kingdom was left in turmoil and the people were impoverished. An empress was finally placed upon the throne, but her reign lasted only six years. In recent years, as he suffered from the *shitsudou*, public order disintegrated. And then this calamity. All those proximate to En or Kou have fled the country. But the great majority remain behind in Kei. And during all this time, they have been left to the mercies of the *youma* and natural disasters. There is no way of saving them."

"So why didn't he go and choose the right king as soon as possible?"

"That is what he has done."

Youko shook her head. "There's just no way."

"Why is that? I believe that you possess all the necessary kingly attributes."

"You're kidding."

"You are the master of your own soul. You know what responsibilities you bear toward yourself alone. When it comes to a ruler who lacks such knowledge, trying to persuade him of his duties is useless. How can he who cannot rule himself rule others?"

"I . . . can't."

"But"

"Shouryuu," Enki said in a reproving voice. "You're twisting arms. What the Royal Kei does with the Kingdom of Kei is up to her. Until she is prepared to accept the consequences of her actions, let her be."

The En sighed. "Yes, you are right. But this alone I wish to ask of the Royal Kei. I am doing everything I can think of to assist the people of Kei, but the national treasury is not inexhaustible. I am pleading with you to help save my kingdom, and yours."

"I'll think it over." Youko hung her head. There was no way she could bring herself to look them in the eye.

"Excuse me," said Rakushun, "but has anybody figured out what king has it in for Youko?"

The En looked at Enki. Enki stared off into the distance. He said, "And who do you think it is?"

"Well, I've come to the conclusion that it is probably the Royal Kou."

Youko looked at Rakushun. For just a moment, this young man with the strained expression on his face seemed in no way connected to the gentle rat she knew.

“And why’s that?”

“This is by no means definite. But Youko was chased to exhaustion around those mountains. I don’t think all of the youma that attacked her were the kirin’s shirei. In that case, what could have caused the wild youma living in the mountains to come together like that? Even if half were shirei, that is still too many. I can’t help feeling that the Kingdom of Kou itself is on the decline.”

The En nodded. “So it is. In fact, I have received from Kou a strongly-worded petition seeking the extradition of a kaikyaku who fled to En. Kaikyaku have fled here from Kou before. But extraditing a kaikyaku is such an unusual step that I had Enki look into it. Somehow or other, someone in Kou has been supplying Joei with funds. Furthermore, Kou *is* falling into chaos. Not only does this cast all the more suspicion upon the Royal Kou, but only yesterday, we received word that Kourin (埜麟) has fallen ill with the *shitsudou*.”

“ . . . with the *shitsudou*,” Rakushun echoed. Bitterness clouded his otherwise lively, young face. “In that case, the end of Kou is near.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” Youko asked.

It was the En who answered. “It would be simple to counsel with the Royal Kou as a colleague, but the man will not agree to meet. And even if we did, nothing can be done if he will not admit to the error of his ways. Our only remaining recourse is that the rightful Empress of Kei accepts the Mandate of Heaven and fills the vacant throne. Why the Royal Kou has meddled in the internal affairs of Kei, I do not know. But if the purpose was to put a puppet on the throne and lead her around by the nose, then only then shall we see his ambitions wither and an end to this insulting pretense.”

There was much more in the expression on his face that was left unsaid. Youko bowed her head. “Please give me time.”

Part VIII

Chapter 60



ouko was put up in a magnificent suite with a soaring ceiling. The interior decor, from the furniture to the water pitcher on the table, had the indelible mark of fine taste and sumptuous luxury. The room was enormous, the glazed windows huge. There were arrangements of flowers, the smell of burning incense, the kind of thing that would make the eyes of a peasant from the backwoods of Kou spin.

Having become accustomed to a pauper's accommodations on the road, she felt the same. She couldn't settle down. She had wanted to retreat to her room, give herself some time to think things out, but the ornate, overstuffed chairs were uncomfortable. The lacquered table was finished with mother of pearl and would show even a fingerprint if she touched it. She hesitated even to sit there with her chin in her hands.

Glancing around the room, she saw another, smaller room, about ten feet by ten. Perhaps she could relax better in there. Then she approached the room and sighed.

The door partitioning the two rooms was folded back. The door was engraved with a delicate fretwork. As she stepped inside, the room became much bigger. Silk curtains hung down over a raised platform. The curtains were half open. Silk bedding covered the platform. That this ten-foot square room consisted of just a bed struck as some sort of bad joke. She couldn't think of lying on this thing. Sleep was out of the question.

Bored with it all, Youko opened the big window. The French doors reached from the floor to the ceiling. Stained glass filled the geometric patterns between the lattices. Beyond the doors was a wide balcony.

As the En had promised, her room faced a terrace that looked out over the Sea of Clouds.

When she opened the window, the salt smell of the sea drifted in. It was preferable to the incense. She stepped outside. The terrace, covered with white stone, ran around the circumference of the building. It was about as wide as a small courtyard.

She walked along the terrace. She leaned against the railing and gazed out at the Sea of Clouds. The big moon was sliding down the sky into the waves. Staring at the waves dashing against the rocks beneath her, she heard the sound of footsteps behind her. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw an animal with a gray coat coming toward her.

"Out for a walk?" she asked.

Rakushun grinned at the question. "So you can't sleep either?"

"Yeah. You too?"

"How can you sleep in a room like that? Now I'm sorry I didn't go back to the inn."

"Same here."

The rat laughed. "What are you talking about? You have a palace just like this one."

The smile disappeared from her face. “Yeah, I probably do.”

Rakushun stood next to Youko and, like her, gazed out over the ocean. “The palace in Kei is located in Gyouten (堯天), Ei Province (瑛州). It’s called Kinpa Palace (金波宮), the Palace of Golden Waves.”

It didn’t peak her interest. She answered with a listless, “Huh.”

Rakushun was quiet for a moment. “You know, Youko.”

“What?”

“It’s most likely that Keiki was captured by Joei, the pretender.”

“So it seems.”

“If the Royal Kou was really determined that you never take the throne, there’s one foolproof method.”

“Yeah, kill Keiki.”

“Right. If Keiki dies, you die too. Because you have not yet ascended Mount Hou and accepted the Divine Decree, I don’t know what would happen to you. But that would probably be the end result.”

Youko nodded. “No doubt. It’s because I did that covenant thing with him and because I’m no longer a human being. That’s why I don’t get injured easily and why I can understand what people say. It’s why I can wield a sword and why I was able to cross the Kyokai. It’s all because of that.”

“Probably. Keiki is in the hands of your enemies. For you own good”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Youko.”

“No. It’s not that I think I’m above it all. I know what a king is, what a kirin is. That’s why I’m not going to make a decision like this just based on self-preservation.”

“But”

“I’m not being self-destructive.” She smiled. “When I came here, considering the state I was in, dying wouldn’t have come as much of a surprise. I’ve somehow survived till now, but probably more due to luck than anything else. I was as good as dead when I came here, so it’s not something I get all choked up about. At any rate, I don’t want to be the kind of person who gets all choked up about stuff like that.

“I don’t want this to be some rash, life or death decision. I know what everybody expects of me. But if I simply do what is convenient for everybody else, let everybody else determine what my life will be, then I won’t be shouldering the responsibility myself. That’s why I’ve got to think it over.”

Rakushun looked up at her with his jet-black eyes. “We didn’t know that you were so confused by all of this.”

“I can’t do it.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I know just how mean and ugly a human being I am. I’m no king. I don’t have it in me.”

“That’s not true.”

“If you are a *hanjuu*, Rakushun, then I’m a *hanjuu* too. I may appear human, but I’m a beast inside.”

“Youko”

Youko gripped the railing of the balcony. There was a delicate beauty in the luxurious feel of the ornate stone. Casting her gaze downwards, she could see the lights

of Kankyuu glowing like sea fire through the transparent water. The waves broke with a gentle rumble upon the shore. It was an extraordinarily sublime scene, but one far removed from what was in her heart. There was an equally striking castle in Gyouten, Kinpa Palace. To think of herself there aroused in her not timidity but disgust.

That's what she told him. Rakushun sighed. "A king is just an ordinary person until he is chosen by the kirin."

"Being chosen by the kirin doesn't change anything. I'm the same person I was, stealing from people, threatening people, assaulting people when I have to. I trust nobody. I was willing to trade your life for my own."

"The Royal En thinks you can do it."

"He doesn't know what a miserable creature I am."

"I think you can do it. I'm the one you were thinking of finishing off, so if I say so, then it must be so."

Youko looked down at him, this rat who stood no higher than her stomach. He poked his head through the handrails and gazed intently at the ocean floating in the sky.

"I just can't . . ."

He didn't answer her murmured dissent, only continued to stare out at the Sea of Clouds. He patted Youko on the arm with his small hand. When Youko turned to him, the gray coat of his back was already to her.

"Rakushun."

"All this has left me at my wit's end as well. There's nothing wrong with being confused. Take your time, think about it."

Youko watched as he walked off into the distance. He waved his hand, but didn't turn around.

"Rakushun," she said to herself, "even you don't know everything about me."

But I know.

This wasn't the sound of her own voice echoing inside her skull. Her head shot up, and she scanned the surroundings. But it wasn't a sound she had heard with her ears.

You have not been alone. I have seen everything.

"Jouyuu?"

Accept the throne. You are capable. You are qualified.

Youko couldn't answer. That he had spoken left her speechless. And what he said, only more so.

I have disobeyed the command of my lord. Forgive me.

Keiki's instructions to him came back to her, "Be as if you are not there." Was this why, until this moment, he had not once responded to a thing she had said?

You thought me a monster, begged for me to be taken out of you. That is why. This was an error on your part.

"I really am a fool," she said to herself.

This statement went unanswered.

Chapter 61

8-2 The next day, Youko was awakened by her lady-in-waiting. When she took her seat for breakfast, to the question on everybody's face, she shook her head, no. Rakushun came as a rat. He nodded and fluttered his whiskers. The En and Enki showed only small signs of disappointment.

The En said, and some bitterness was mingled with his words, "Your kingdom and your subjects are yours to do with as you wish. But in any case, I would like to see you reunited with Keiki. If you still intend to abdicate, that is another matter. At the very least, for the sake of the kingdom, you should want the Saiho back safe and sound. Do you not think so?"

Youko nodded. "I haven't come to any conclusion in my own regard, but I don't object to rescuing Keiki. But how?"

"We have no recourse but to force. Keiki is being kept in Sei Province, in the midst of the pretender's army."

"If Keiki can be rescued, then can I go home? I am asking a simple question."

The En nodded. "Keiki can precipitate a shoku. Because you have the constitution to cross the Kyokai, there would be no difficulty. Rightly or wrongly, if you wish to return and Keiki refuses, I shall have Enki carry it out."

He was a fair person, Youko thought. He could equally have threatened not to if she refused to become king.

"Frankly, I'd rather not," said Enki. "When the time comes, I'll get Keiki to do it."

The En glared at him. "Rokuta."

"Since you're playing dumb, I'll fill her in. Calamities occur whenever there's a shoku. If it's only a kirin crossing over, a windstorm, maybe. But in the case of a king crossing over as well, we're talking massive destruction. And it'll happen over there too."

"In Japan?"

"Yes. Here *and* there. Because here and there are not meant to mingle together. When you were brought here, the shoku caused widespread damage in Kou. But that was when your kingship wasn't so big a deal. That's not bound to be the case next time. If it was up to me, I'd have no part of it."

"If I am able to go home, I wouldn't want to impose so on Keiki."

"Suit yourself," he said with a rather sardonic smile and a bob of his head.

The En spoke up in sterner tones. "Even if you do return to Japan, Youko, you will by no means be beyond danger."

"I know."

As long as the Royal Kou refused to relent, he could still send youma after her. Her return as well would likely occasion natural disasters. She was bad luck, a jinx. Here or there, going home would be no good for anybody. But even knowing this, she couldn't make up her mind.

"Do you think that before I go back, I ought to settle the score with the Royal Kou?"

"That you cannot do. I would not help you in the least."

"You can't?"

The En nodded. "If nothing else, remember this. There are three sins a king cannot commit. The first is to reject the Mandate of Heaven and stray from the Way. The second

is to choose suicide rather than accept the Mandate. The last is to invade another country, even, for example, to suppress an internal rebellion.

Nodding, Youko said, “Yes, but what about you? What about invading Kei in order to take back Keiki?”

“If the Royal Kei herself stands at the vanguard and leads the way, then it shall be done in her name. In such a case, we are only answering her call and assisting her as her allies.”

“Of course.”

The En laughed heartily. “In order to secure Keiki’s release, I shall grant you the use of the Imperial Army. What say you?”

Youko bowed, a thin smile on her lips. “I thank most kindly. I apologize for giving you nothing but reasons to be disappointed by my presence.”

Enki scowled, then smiled. “Shouryuu wants there to be more taika kings. But it’s nothing to get worked up about. After all, up till now there’s been only one.”

“There’s only one?”

“For the time being. There have been any number in the past, but their numbers were never that great.”

“Aren’t you a taika too, Enki?”

“Yes. Me and Shouryuu and Taiki (泰麒). You make it four.”

“Taiki is the kirin of the Kingdom of Tai?”

“Yes. The *hinasa* (雛さ) of the Outland Kingdom of Tai.

“Hinasa?”

“A fledgling. A kirin who has not reached adulthood.”

“Like you?”

“I am an adult kirin. When a kirin reaches adulthood, his outward appearance stops growing as well.”

“In other words, you grew faster than Keiki did.”

“That’s it,” he said, with no little pride in the fact. The En smiled to himself.

“So Taiki wasn’t an adult?”

“No.”

“*Wasn’t*, as in the past tense?”

Enki responded to Youko’s question with a strained expression on his face. He exchanged glances with the En. “The Taiki died. At least, that’s what was communicated to us. The Kingdom of Tai is in the midst of chaos. No one knows what happened to Taiki or to the Royal Tai.”

Youko sighed. “So it’s a bad situation, like it is here.”

“Where there are people, there are complications. His name is Kouri (高里). In human years, he would have been about your age.”

“A man?”

“The *ki* in kirin indicates a male. The Tai kirin was a beautiful black unicorn.”

“A black unicorn?”

“Have you ever seen a kirin?”

“Just artist’s versions.”

“The coat of a kirin is an orange-yellow, the back variegated, the mane usually gold.”

“Like your hair?”

“Yes, but this isn’t hair, really. It’s a mane.”

Makes sense, Youko thought to herself.

“The Tai kirin was black, the color of polished steel. The coat was jet black and the back silver. This variegation was rather unique.”

“Is it rare?”

“Indeed. In all our history, there’s nothing quite like the black unicorn. There have been red unicorns and white unicorns too, but I have never seen them.”

“Huh.”

“After Taiki was said to have died, the Royal Tai could not expect to live long. So he went to Mount Hou where the *Tai-ka* (泰果)—the fruit bearing the Tai kirin—should have been ripening, but he found nothing there.”

“Tai-ka?”

“The tree that bears the fruit of the kirin is on Mount Hou. When a kirin dies, at the same time, the ranka of the new kirin should begin to grow. If Taiki had died, it would become the next Tai kirin. In the case of a female, then *Tairin* (泰麟), from the second syllable of *kirin*. That ranka is bestowed with its royal name, in this case, designated the *Tai-ka*. However, there was no Tai-ka to be found on Mount Hou. So he still must be alive.”

“Don’t kirin have parents?”

“No. Being a taika is beside the point. That’s why kirin don’t have names. Only titles.”

“Keiki too?”

Enki nodded. There seemed something quite sad about that fact. As if knowing what was on her mind, he put on a deliberately sullen face.

“The kirin are sad creatures. They live only for the king, have no parents or siblings, not even names. If the king chooses, he can work you half to death. In the end, you end up dying because of the king. And not even a grave awaits you.”

Enki shot a look at the En. His lord turned the other way. Enki frowned and sighed.

“No grave?” Youko asked, and Enki averted his eyes as if in self-reproach for having brought the subject up.

“You can’t get somebody to prepare a grave for you?”

The En said with a forced smile, “It’s not that he does not have a grave. King and kirin are interred together. He means there isn’t a body.”

“Why?” Perhaps, she thought, because the kirin were supernatural beings, no physical body was left behind.

“That’s enough.”

Enki said, “Look, it’s no big secret. The kirin employs the youma as his servants. The kirin and the youma make a pact. The youma who accept the pact promise to obey the kirin. In exchange, when the kirin dies, the youma get to feast on his body.”

Youko looked up, first at the En, then at Enki. Enki shrugged.

“That’s what it comes down to. Kirin sure must taste good. Anyway, I’ll be dead by then, so I can’t say I really care. If it seems a sad end to you, well, then take good care of Keiki. Try not to let him down.”

Youko didn’t know what to say. So instead, she said, “The Royal Kou apparently wasn’t scared of letting down Kourin.”

The En smiled sardonically. “Who knows what the Royal Kou is thinking.”

Enki shrugged as well. “Interfering in the internal affairs of other kingdoms will lose you the Mandate of Heaven. Despite that, he couldn’t refrain from launching on this idiotic course. He must have a powerful reason.”

“You would think.”

“And yet, acting without a thought in their heads, save knowing that at some point they’ll have to face the music alone, humans go rushing in where angels fear to tread. They’re fools. The more it hurts, the less they think.”

His words hit home like a punch to the solar plexus. Youko could only nod. “It’s scary.”

“Scary?”

“Yeah. I can’t imagine doing something like that.”

The En smiled softly. “The kirin cannot deny the king. But that doesn’t mean that he will carry out every order without complaint. Never forget you’re just a dumb human. That’s the best way to help out the other half of you.”

“The other half of me?”

“Your kirin.”

Youko nodded. She glanced at the chair to her right. The sword was sitting there. The Suiguu-tou, the Water Monkey Sword, that could see the future and the present and what was far from her.

The En hadn’t said as much, but if she could control the sword, shouldn’t she be able to tell what the Royal Kou was up to?

Chapter 62

8-3 The kingdom had two armies. The Provincial Guard was entrusted to the province lords and garrisoned in their various locals. The Imperial Army answered directly to the king.

The regular cavalry would push toward Iryuu (維龍), the provincial capital of Sei in the Kingdom of Kei. This campaign, however, would take a month, and when it came to saving Keiki, a month was too long to wait. So it was decided that a combined squadron of a hundred and twenty elite horsemen, skilled at riding pegasi and other flying beasts, would be mustered for an aerial raid on Iryuu.

En and Enki left at once to make the preparations. They weren’t back by lunch or supper. Leaving Rakushun to his own devices, Youko returned to her room. She placed the sword on the table and sat down in front of it.

She was the lord of the sword. Although she understood this in theory, what it meant in practice perplexed her. It must be quite difficult, but as she hadn’t the slightest idea of what to do, it couldn’t hurt to give it a try and seeing what happened.

She didn’t know how to deliberately bring about a vision. But if all she had to do was call it forth, perhaps it wouldn’t be that hard.

Long before she had come to this world, she had seen the dreams and had heard the sound of falling water. When she asked the En about it, he told her that those visions had undoubtedly been shown to her by the sword. Most likely, the sword had predicted the enemy attack, and had been warning her, the lord of the sword, of what was going to happen.

But at the time, Youko hadn't yet met Keiki, had not covenanted with anybody. Yet the sword knew that she was its lord. *Before receiving the Mandate of Heaven, before being chosen . . .*

The En ventured that perhaps she had been born with the Mandate of Heaven upon her shoulders. Or perhaps the burdens of the throne had become her own as soon as Keiki made his decision.

"Who knows?" Enki had chimed in. "I can't say why I picked him. There weren't any obvious *reasons*, except that he was the one."

Enki said that a kirin chose a king by instinct. In any case, Youko did not think that communicating her intentions to the sword should be all that difficult.

She extinguished the lights in the room, drew the sword from the scabbard, and stared at the blade.

Show me the Royal Kou.

Up till now, the sword had continued to show her nothing but visions of her life in Japan. Youko had the feeling that it was because there had been nothing else on her mind but the intent to return to Japan.

Show me what the Royal Kou intends to do. Or, his intentions still being up for grabs, show me what makes the bastard tick.

The blade of the sword began to flicker with a phosphorescent light. Faint shadows played within the light. She heard the sound of falling water. She concentrated on the shadows, waited as the shadows coalesced into recognizable objects.

She saw a white wall. A glazed window. A yard. She recognized the yard. It was the yard of her house.

No, not this.

She focused her thoughts and the vision vanished. She looked at the dark blade in front of her eyes. She had failed.

"You're not going to try this just once," she lectured herself. Again, she stared at the blade. Before, she had not seen multiple visions on a single night, but sooner than she expected, the sword began to glow.

Yet, once again, she found herself looking at the yard of her house. She didn't let herself get discouraged. She concentrated on pushing her conscious thoughts away from the image in front of her. *Not this*, she repeated to herself like a mantra. The vision wavered like the calm surface of water when disturbed.

What appeared next was her room.

No.

And then her school.

No.

As many times as she tried, she saw nothing but the other world. Scenes of her house, her school, her friends' houses. Nothing of this world.

It's this scabbard, Youko thought. The scabbard was toying with her the same way the blue monkey did. Still, she knew it was her fault as well, not being able to put old thoughts behind her. And knowing that, she didn't give up.

Patiently, trying over and over, she finally recognized a vision that came from this world. *At last!* she rejoiced. But then she recognized what she was seeing. The gates of a city surrounded by piles of bodies. The road leading up the gates soaked with blood.

From among the fallen, came wrenching moans. In their midst stood a young man with a dark expression on his face.

God, that's me.

“Stop!” she cried, hastily extinguishing the vision.

It was Goryou, where she had abandoned Rakushun. Even though she knew it was herself, she found her appearance astonishing. Had she really looked so miserable? She threw down the sword. Then conscious of how frightened she was of the sword, she laughed derisively.

But it's the truth, isn't it?

If the blue monkey were here, that's what he would tell her. This was the real world. She didn't have the right to avert her eyes. Better to face it head on. If she kept ignorantly looking away, who knew when she would ever wise up.

Again, she gripped the hilt. She steadied her breathing and concentrated on the blade of the sword. The gates of Goryou soon appeared. In the vision, her visage was suffused with malevolence. At a glance, she knew what she was thinking. She was looking at Rakushun, debating whether or not to kill him.

The guards came rushing out of the city. Youko beat a fast retreat. After running away, the vision wavered and changed. What next appeared before her was a mountain trail. Youko watched as she turned her back on the mother and child who had been so kind to her.

She saw Takki and the old man from Japan and the two men driving the horse cart who were devoured on the road from Hairou. She saw their weeping families. *It's the fault of the kaikyaku*, she heard them curse her.

She was shown the city of Kasai and the horrid aftermath of the attack by the youma. At Goryou, the bodies stacked up like cordwood. Refugees from Kei squatting at the foot of some wall outside some city somewhere.

Youko watched all these visions. She realized that if she tried to reject what the visions were showing her, they would rage against her all the more. If she accepted what they were showing her, the visions drew closer to what she wanted to see.

A palace, and in the palace, an emaciated woman.

“I wish no women to remain in Gyouten.”

“But . . .”

That was Keiki, trying to voice a contrary opinion. Youko guessed that the woman was the Late Empress Yo.

“Criminals refuse an imperial order. Why do you hesitate administering justice to criminals?”

The only life left in the Empress Jokaku was in her eyes. She had the skin of a corpse, sunken cheeks, the tendons stood out in her neck, there was a sickly pallor all about her. Youko sensed these were the woman's last days. She must be suffering much to be that shrunken and skeletal. Despite the mounting pain and knowing the foolishness of her crimes, she was not able to stop herself from committing them.

Youko saw the ruin of the Kingdom of Kei. She thought Kou was poor, but it was nothing compared to the destitution in Kei. She saw villages decimated by youma, the burning huts of the poor caught up in the conflagrations. The land and fields overrun with rodents and locust, rivers overflowing their banks, inundating the paddies with mud and sludge, countless bodies bobbing in the water.

This is the destruction visited upon a kingdom that loses its king.

“The kingdom will fall into ruin,” she had heard over and over. The stark reality of those words finally came home to her. Living in Japan, they would have meant very little. Here, she understood what she had been repeatedly told with such passion.

The next thing she saw was a mountain road.

Chapter 63

8-4 There were two people on the road. One wore a dark shroud over his head like the Grim Reaper. The other had golden hair. They were surrounded by a horde of beasts.

“*Forgive me*, you said.” The statement was addressed by the shrouded personage to the woman, the same woman Youko had encountered on another mountain road.

That would be Kourin.

“I assume, of course, that you were begging *my* forgiveness.”

The Grim Reaper let the shroud fall from his head. What appeared was the deeply wrinkled face of an old man. Nevertheless, he had a large stature that seemed incongruous with his age. A brightly colored parrot perched on his shoulder.

“A helpless girl. It’s too bad we couldn’t finish her off, but wandering about in these mountains, she shouldn’t last long. Though we seemed to have miscalculated about whether or not she had accepted the covenant.” The man spoke in a disinterested tone of voice, devoid of emotion. “Oh, well. She’ll die a dog’s death at the side of the road, or try to sneak into a village and be arrested. Either way, Taiho. Either way.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be upset if something like this happens again. No matter what, that girl must be exterminated.”

When the man said, “that girl,” he must be referring to herself. That meant he was . . . *the Royal Kou.*

“But such a weak-hearted thing. She does not have the constitution to be a great king. You go all the way to Yamato, and *that* is what you bring back?”

The man spoke to one of the beasts. It looked like a deer with only one horn. You could call it a “unicorn,” but only in overall appearance. The mane was a luxuriant gold, the coat a more subdued yellow. The speckled pattern of colors on its back resembled that of a fawn, though these were strange and fantastic colors, glimmering faintly in the sunlight.

“Luck seems not to favor your lord, wouldn’t you say, Kei Taiho?”

Kei Taiho . . . then that was . . . Keiki.

This is a kirin.

She recognized the mountainous location as the road she had traveled from Hairou. What she had taken then for Keiki had been Kourin. What Jouyuu had called “Taiho” had been Keiki in his kirin form.

Kourin said, “As she is a mere child, would it not be better to leave her to the elements? Two men of Kou have died. Please, can you not end all this?”

She looked up at the Royal Kou, tears in her eyes. Youko had observed the same expression on her face at another time, in another place.

“All men die,” her lord answered. “Dust to dust.”

Even now, Youko did not perceive a flicker of humanity in him.

“Heaven will not countenance such actions. Sow the wind and Kou will surely reap the whirlwind. Your lordship shall prove no exception.”

“I have already reaped the whirlwind. You lecture me in vain. I’ve come to the end of my tether. Kou will fall. And when Kou falls, Kei will fall as well. As God is my witness, I will drag the Royal Kei down into the depths with me.”

“How can you hate the taika so much?”

The Royal Kou laughed a hollow laugh. “I don’t hate them. I find them disgusting. Did you know that in that other world, a child is born from its mother’s belly?”

“I know. But what has that to do with this?”

“Don’t you think it filthy?”

“I do not.”

“Well, I do. No taika born from a woman’s belly belongs in this world. They should stay where they came from.”

“Heaven does not agree. Else why should taika be chosen as kings? What is filthy is to reject the Divine Will of Heaven.”

The Royal Kou smirked. “So I gather we won’t be seeing eye to eye on this.”

“No, we shall not.”

“Still, I am your lord. You must follow my lead. Pursue her and kill her. She must not be allowed to escape Kou alive. And while you’re at it, post the Imperial Army along the borders of Kei. She is bound to try to return to Kei.”

“Would it not be better to pay this unclean girl no mind? You call her a girl, you say she does not have the constitution to be a king, then why would you resort to murder to keep her from the throne?”

“I will not have a taika king on the borders of my kingdom!”

Kourin sighed deeply. “What, then, do you intend to do with the Kei Taiho?”

“Give him to Joei. That’ll shut up the province lords.”

“It may silence them for the time being, but it will not allay their suspicions for long. With his horn sealed, the Kei Taiho cannot return to human form. He cannot even speak. What kind of Taiho is that? You must not continue in this manner. Heaven will surely not overlook such indiscretions.”

“I never said that it would.”

“You may be resigned to your fate, but you forget your people.”

“The people of Kou are an unlucky lot. After I die, the next ruler may be of better stock. If you take the long view of things, then perhaps it’s all for the better.”

“What are you saying?” Kourin again buried her face in her hands.

The Royal Kou said in a blank, detached voice, “I was never meant to be a king.” Perhaps he was already beyond hope, completely resigned to his fate. “Both you and Heaven chose badly, indeed.”

“This is not true.”

“True enough. My reign will end after only fifty years. En has stood for five hundred, Sou for almost six hundred. I am a mayfly compared to En and Sou, and yet I have reached my limit.”

“If you changed your heart now, your reign would be much longer.”

“That ship has already sailed, Taiho.”

Kourin hung her head.

“This great task proved my stumbling block. I should have lived and died a provincial guard. Instead, I found myself blessed with this outrageous fortune, when I was not in the least qualified to accept it. A scant fifty years was the best I could do.”

“Do not call it scant. The reigns of many kings have been briefer.”

“So they have been. The late Empress of Kei, for one. And not just her. Kei has always been caught up in unrest, has fared far worse than Kou. Some of my subjects are ignorant enough to look at En and Sou and say how much poorer Kou is. But when compared to Kei, well, Kou is so much the better.”

“Neither En nor Sou were wealthy kingdoms to begin with.”

“I know. I did as much as I could. But for every step I take, the En and the Sou are two more ahead of me. And so Kou will be poorer than En and Sou forever. Simply put, I will never reach their level, never be their equal.”

“That is not so.”

“I can’t compete with En and Sou. But Kei is different. Kei is poorer than Kou. But now, if a new king were to ascend to the throne and Kei were to become wealthier than Kou, then what? Kou alone impoverished? And I, the prince of fools who made it so?”

“Will you lose the Mandate of Heaven over so slight a reason?”

The Royal Kou did not answer the question. “Yamato is a wealthy country. Talk to the *kaikyaku* and you understand that very well. The En returned from Yamato, and his country is wealthy too. Taika are different from those of us born in this world. When the kingdom of that En taika is so wealthy, why shouldn’t I fear the Royal Kei? The taika know secret things that allow them to rule a country so. That’s why, no matter what I do, I will never measure up.”

“You are talking nonsense.”

He smiled a faint, weary smile. “Yes, utter nonsense. I have come too far to back down now. And even if I did, the fate of Kou is set. Kou will go to ruin. I will die, and when I do, the Kei taika too. We’ll all go down together.”

You fool. The words came unbidden to Youko’s lips, “What a jerk.” The vision vanished. Exhausted, Youko set down the sword. “How could someone do something so stupid?”

He didn’t want to get left behind, but rather than seeking the cooperation of his neighbors, he would rather drag them down to his level. It happened all the time. God, did it happen all the time. But, still . . .

“If a king can’t give a moment’s thought to the suffering of his own people, he’ll do the unthinkable just in order to pull off a dumb stunt like this.”

How many people would get caught up in this, how many would lose their lives? If Kou was destroyed, the damage would be unimaginable. Enki’s words echoed in her head. *People are idiots. And the more they suffer, the dumber they get.*

Flanked by the kingdoms of Kei and Sou—the Royal En and the Royal Sou never far from his mind—fifty years at the most, he had said. But how long a time was that to him? This was a road she could just as easily head down as well. The Kingdom of Kei was in the same position as Kou, vis-a-vis En and Sou. Was it possible she could start thinking the same way the Royal Kou did?

“This is scary,” she said to herself. “God, this is really scary.”

Chapter 64

8-5 Youko went out onto the terrace for a breath of night air. She saw she had a guest.

“Rakushun.”

He was gazing out at the Sea of Clouds. He glanced over his shoulder, waved hello with his tail.

“Can’t sleep?” she asked.

“I’ve been thinking about things.”

“Thinking about things?”

Rakushun nodded. “How to get Youko to change her mind, things like that.”

Youko smiled wryly. She joined him as she had the night before. She leaned against the railing and looked down at the Sea of Clouds.

“Can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Why do you want me to be king?”

“It’s not a matter of me wanting. You are the king. You’ve been chosen by the kirin. But you keep trying to abdicate. So I keep trying to think of ways to stop you. When a king turns his back on his country, it’s bad luck for both.”

“If I became king, it’d probably be even worse.”

“Not in this case.”

“Why not?”

“Because you have what it takes to do the job.”

“I can’t.”

“You can,” Rakushun said and sighed. “Even now, why do you think so little of yourself?”

“Because it’s not just about me.” Youko looked down at the waves crashing against the shore. “If it were just about me, then sure, I’d give it my best and see what happened. That is, if the responsibility were all mine and I’d be the only one who’d end up dead when I really screwed up. But that’s not the case here.”

“The people of Kei await the day when they can return to their country.”

“Sure, to a wealthy, peaceful country. But that’s not something I can give them.”

“It’s not only about being chosen by the kirin. The Royal En says that anybody has the ability to become an enlightened monarch.”

“If that were true, then why is Kei in chaos? Why should Kou be? Even if that ability is there, it is no easy task bringing it to the fore.”

“But you will.”

“Groundless self-confidence is arrogance.”

Reproofed, Rakushun bowed his head.

“This isn’t about my self-esteem. If you think that’s what my lack of self-confidence comes down to, then so be it. But I’ve got reasons for thinking so. I’ve learned a lot here, the most important of which, to put it simply, is that I’m an idiot.”

“Youko.”

“I don’t get any pleasure from criticizing myself. I’m an honest-to-goodness fool. Knowing that much about myself, I’ve finally gotten around to searching out the less stupid parts of me. That’s what comes next, Rakushun. If I try my best and bit by bit can make myself an even slightly better person, then it’d be worth it. If being chosen by the

kirin to be a king is proof that you are a good person, then that's something I ought to strive for. But that isn't me now. That's me a long time from now, after I've become a little less of a dunderhead."

I see, Rakushun muttered to himself. He let go of the railing and paced around the wide veranda. "You're scared."

"I sure am."

"This big responsibility fell on your shoulders, and now you're scared stiff."

"That's pretty much it."

"Then you'd better hurry up and get Keiki back, Youko."

When Youko looked at him, he was standing behind her, in her shadow. "You're not doing this all by yourself. What do you think the kirin are there for? Why do you think Heaven made it so that the kirin chooses the king and not the other way around? You call yourself contemptible, you say that you've acted despicably. If you say so, then who am I to contradict you? But when Keiki chose you, he must have thought those aspects of yourself necessarily as well."

"What are you saying?"

"Bring all the parts together to make the whole. You are insufficient by yourself, and so is Keiki. Isn't that why king and kirin were made to exist together? A kirin is a kind of *hanjuu*, half-human, half-beast. You say you are too. Two halves make a whole, don't you see? The same way as with the Royal En and Enki."

Youko nodded.

"There are people who'd be ecstatic to become a king. Having the good sense to get scared thinking about your people means you have the qualities to sit on the throne."

"That's not it."

"Trust Keiki."

"But . . ."

"And trust yourself more. If it will take you five more years to grow into the crown, then why not start now? What's there to be afraid of?"

"But . . ."

"Keiki chose you as king. Right now, no one else on earth will look to anyone but you as the Royal Kei. The Divine Will of Heaven is the will of the people. That means that no one else can bring about the happiness of the people of Kei. But let's not start things off so seriously. The people of Kei are your subjects. By the same token, you are a subject of Kei. So perhaps the place to begin is with yourself."

"Yeah, but . . ."

"If you wish to become a better person, accept the throne and become a better *king*. Do that and you will become a better person, will you not? The duties of a king are indeed heavy. But isn't it better that way? The more responsibilities a person willingly bears, the quicker the soul is honed."

"And if I don't become this better person?"

"If you have the will to better yourself, you will, regardless. The kirin and your subjects will be your instructors. With so many teachers, you won't remain a fool for long."

For a long time, Youko stared silently at the sea. "If I become king, I won't be able to go home."

"Do you want to?"

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

Youko nodded. “To be honest, my life in that other world wasn’t so great. And I don’t mind being here as much as I used to.”

“Of course not.”

“But ever since I came here, all I can think about is going back.”

“I understand.”

“My parents are there. My home, my friends. If you asked me, yes or no, are they good parents, are they good friends, I’d have a hard time answering. But it’s not their fault. I was lacking as a human being, so the relationships I formed were lacking as well. But if I went back, I think I could do it right. Start all over from square one, make a place for myself in the world. I really regret being such a jerk. That’s why I’d like to have the chance to do it over again.”

Her tears spilled down onto her hands, still grasping the handrail. “Even if I couldn’t make it all right, even if that is not the world I truly belong to, I still miss it. I never said goodbye. If I’d had the time to prepare myself, I don’t think it would hurt this much. But I left it all behind without a single word of farewell.”

“So you did.”

“And not only that. I’ve been telling myself all along that I wanted to go home, that I was definitely going home. It’s tough giving up what’s kept me going this whole time.”

“I know.”

“If I went home, I would regret it for sure. And if I don’t, I’ll regret it as well. No matter what I do, I’m going to hurt. I want both, but I have to choose only one.”

A soft, warm hand touched her cheek, wiping away the tears.

“Rakushun”

“Don’t turn around. I’m not really presentable right now.”

She found herself laughing and crying at the same time.

“C’mon, don’t laugh. I can’t help it. My rat hands won’t reach.”

“I guess not.”

“You know, Youko. When you don’t know which choice is the best, then you should choose the path you *ought* to take, rather than the one you *wish* for. You know you are going to regret the path not taken. But regrets being more or less equal, better the one where the regret is even a bit less.”

“I know.”

“And if you go with what you *ought* to do, then all that remains is the wishful thinking you had to give up to do the right thing. Such regrets should rest easier on the mind in the long run, should it not?”

“Yes.”

The hand clasped against her cheek was warm. “I really want to see what kind of kingdom you are going to build, Youko.”

“Thank you, Rakushun.”

Chapter 65

8-6 On the day of the raid on Iryuu, Youko was given use of a species of flying horse called a *kitsuryou* (吉量). The kitsuryou had a red mane with white stripes and gorgeous golden eyes. Jouyuu knew how to ride a horse.

“You’re welcome to stay in Kankyuu,” said the En, but Youko did not agree. With as many as six thousand troops defending Iryuu, even one more rider could make a difference. Moreover, there was the matter of Keiki, not to mention that this was the business of the Kingdom of Kei. It would not do for her to stay hidden.

To face the En and Enki, who had ruled their kingdom continuously for five-hundred years, and declare, *I shall go forth*, required as much courage as she could muster. She still knew almost nothing of this world, nothing of how a kingdom actually ran, nothing of its political structure. She hardly had the right to call herself a king.

That was why she had no choice but to go forth, despite how reckless it might appear. If war was what was called for, then to war she would go. And because she could only keep going forward once the ball started rolling, locking herself away in Gen’ei Palace was unacceptable.

Not only Youko, but Rakushun refused as well the safe haven of the palace. She insisted in the strongest terms that he remain behind, but he would not be cowed. Consequently, Enki said that Rakushun could be of use to him, and they left together for Kei. A kirin could not abide bloodshed, and Enki would not accompany them into battle. Instead, he and Rakushun would visit the provinces that had fallen to the pretender’s army and try to persuade them to see the reality of the situation.

A hundred and twenty beasts flew across the Sea of Clouds. The pretender’s army numbered twenty thousand. Of those, a good five thousand were concentrated in Sei Province. This, the En pointed out, was not a force a hundred and twenty could go up against.

“The objective is Keiki alone. If we can rescue Keiki, then we can play for time. If we can sow doubt within the ranks of the pretender’s army, convince them that what they are so vigorously defending is merely the pretender herself, then all the better. If only three of the province lords can be brought around, then the tide will turn.”

The first step in that process was taking back Keiki. Youko asked, “Can we carry the day with only a hundred and twenty?”

The En laughed. “For the time being, the soldiers I have gathered may not be so great as to take on a thousand each. It is sufficient that they each be the equal of ten. Furthermore, there is no good defense against an attack coming from above the Sea of Clouds. There aren’t that many who can fight *and* fly. Our opponents are likely unaware that the Royal Kei is in our care. I came to get you myself in order to keep them in the dark.”

So that was why the En ventured all the way to Youshou by himself.

“And, well, I was curious about what kind of a person this Royal Kei was. But that’s why Joei is unlikely to believe that En would ever invade. Even if she did, coming over the Sea of Clouds with a cavalry of a mere one hundred and twenty, they won’t see us coming. After that, it all depends on you.”

“On me?”



“If you can turn the loyalties of the pretender’s army, it could be over quicker than we think. There are bound to be few of your subjects with any desire to fight on Joei’s behalf. Once they understand that you are the rightful king, they will hand over Keiki.”

If it were only that simple, Youko sighed.

“Don’t doubt yourself. You are the king. Never forget it. An actual monarch is something of a vainglorious concierge, but you should never strike that pose with your people. The face you put forward should always be that of the unquestioned person in charge.”

Youko sighed again. “And exactly how do you do that? Sure, if you happened to believe totally in yourself. But I don’t.”

“Ah, and there’s the rub.” The En laughed. “The way I figure it, the kirin chose me, so if I’ve got a gripe about it, he’s going to get an earful.”

Youko looked at him, a bit taken aback. “That’s the way to become an enlightened monarch?”

“So it is. At least it’s gotten me this far. If I’ve got a beef about something, Enki will hear it. And even then, if I’m still not happy about it, I’ll give it my best shot, anyway.”

“That makes sense, I suppose. I’ll keep it in mind.”

What Youko saw of the Kingdom of Kei with her own eyes was far worse than the visions she’d been shown by the sword. Peering down through the transparent depths of the Sea of Clouds, she began to grasp the extent of the devastation of the countryside. At this time of year, rice seedlings should be visible on the surface of the paddies, but it looked like most of the fields had been abandoned and gone fallow. The roads were empty of people, the hamlets and villages still as death, burned to the ground, only the scorched and blackened ruins remaining behind.

She had thought Kou poor. It was nothing compared to the destitution of Kei. Her heart ached as the images piled up of refugees huddled together at the foot of the city walls. They surely all wanted to go home. She knew well the misery of not having a bed of her own to sleep in at night.

The ground rolling by beneath them, they flew across the Sea of Clouds for half a day before arriving at Iryuu, the capital of Sei Province. In Iryuu as in Kankyuu, there was a high mountain whose peak jutted above the Sea of Clouds. One of the buildings at its peak was the castle of the province lord. Keiki was sequestered somewhere inside that castle.

While still a good way off from the castle, Youko saw a swarm of black shadows rising from the castle like a flock of birds taking to wing. The castle’s airborne defenders.

To fight meant to kill. Up till now, Youko had killed everything *except* a human being, but only because she had not had the courage to take the weight of a human death upon her own shoulders. When she had decided to go forth, she resolved herself to the task ahead of her. It was not that noble ends justified taking human life any more lightly. She would remember forever her opponents and the number of those she struck down. This, she understood, was as much as she could do.

“Are you ready for this?” the En asked.

Youko nodded.

“Keep your head about you. Losing the Royal Kei now, just as she is coming into her own, that would be a tragedy.”

“I’m not so easy to kill. I don’t have the good sense to know when I’m defeated, you see.”

The En responded with a puzzled frown. Seeing the look on his face, Youko had to laugh. She wheeled herself around to face her charging foes. She drew her sword. The kitsuryou galloped unfaltering through the air. They plunged into the mist of the flying horsemen climbing up into the sky from the castle.

Chapter 66

8-7 A solitary beast, imprisoned in a room in the depths of the castle, shackled within a thick wall of netting . . .

“ . . . a kirin.”

This is a kirin.

An animal with a translucent golden coat and a single horn on its head. The kirin’s slender legs, like those of some species of deer, were bound in iron chains. The kirin looked at Youko with its deeply colored eyes. When she approached closer, it touched her arm with its slightly rounded muzzle.

“Keiki”

At the sound of her voice, the kirin looked straight at her. It folded its legs beneath itself and prostrated itself at her feet. When she knelt and reached out her hand, it did not shrink back. She stroked its golden mane

The other half of me. The beast who had delivered such a fate to her, who in that other world existed only in fairy tales.

Youko said, “I’ve been searching for you.”

The kirin brought its muzzle next to her knees. Several times, almost as if bowing to her, it nuzzled its head against her. Again, as she stroked its mane, she heard a hard noise at her feet, the sound of the chains binding it.

“Hold on. I’ll get those things off you.”

She stood and focused her attention on the shackles. Aiming the tip of the blade, she drove the sword straight down, severing the fetters. The kirin sprang nimbly to its feet, but continued to chafe its head, specifically its horn, against her arm.

“What’s the matter?”

She looked closer and noticed a subtle pattern of designs on the horn, characters a hand’s breadth in a reddish-brown color that looked an awful lot like dried blood.

“Where did this come from?”

Keiki went on scraping the horn against her arm. Youko couldn’t help but attend to this vexing behavior. Rakushun was a hanjuu and he could talk. In this world, where even the enchanted magical creatures could speak, should not the kirin, the preeminent of the sacred beasts, be capable of speech as well?

Now that she thought about it, she recalled the vision she had seen in the sword. Kourin had said something like, *With its horn sealed, it cannot return to human form and cannot speak.* When she lightly brushed her hand against the horn, the kirin calmed down. She scrubbed harder with her sleeve, lightly grazing the surface, but changing nothing else. Examining it more closely, she saw that the thin characters were etched into the horn.

A wound she could do something about. Youko took the jewels from her pocket. Applying the jewels and gently abrading the surface, she saw the characters growing fainter. Repeating the process until the characters were almost imperceptible, she suddenly heard a voice at her elbow, a voice she hadn't heard in such a long time.

"I thank you."

"Keiki?"

The kirin narrowed its eyes slightly and looked up at Youko. "Yes, it is I. I do regret any undue hardships that may have been inflicted upon you in my absence."

Youko smiled. She had even missed that composed, unapologetic tone of voice.

"Are you alone?"

"The Royal En is lending a hand. The Imperial Army of En is holding off the pretender's forces."

"I see." He nodded, then called out in a strong voice, "Hyouki! Juusaku!"

The two beasts appeared, as if emerging from out of the walls. "We are here."

"Go and offer your assistance to the Royal En."

The two beasts bowed deeply and slipped away.

"You are okay?"

"Of course," the kirin said with a nod. His utterly unflappable voice was really quite amusing.

"So when your horn was sealed, your shirei were bound as well?"

"You seem to have learned a great deal," the kirin muttered. "Yes, that is what happened. I am sorry for any trouble this might have occasioned on your behalf."

"Jouyuu wasn't bound so it didn't affect me. What about Kaiko and Hankyo?"

"They are here. Shall I call them?"

"No, as long as they're okay. But I would like to meet them later."

"That can be arranged."

"Oh, come to think about it, I do have a request to make."

"What is that?"

"I'd like you to reverse the order you gave to Jouyuu. I'm still not ready to do without him."

The kirin looked at Youko and blinked several times. "You have indeed become a different person."

"I have. Thanks to you and thanks to the *hinman* (賓満). Jouyuu was a great help. I'd like to say so personally, and there's something else I'd like to ask."

"A request you wish to make?"

"Yeah. How do you spell his name?"

The beast's eyes opened wide. "A most peculiar request."

"I suppose. But it seems I haven't really heard his real name yet. It's been bugging me."

As soon as Youko spoke, that unexpected sensation crept up her arm to her hand. Seemingly of its own accord, her finger wrote the characters in the air. "The Useless (冗, *Jou*) Assistant (祐, *yu*)."

Youko smiled. "Thank you, Jouyuu (冗祐), my Useless Assistant."

The shirei serve the kirin, and by extension the king. There is no need to thank me.

Youko only laughed. Looking at her, the kirin narrowed its eyes. "You truly have changed."

“Yeah, it’s been a real learning experience.”

“To speak the honest truth, I did not think we would ever meet again.”

Youko nodded. “Same here. Say, can’t you turn back into a person?”

“I surely do not wish to appear naked before you!”

Youko had to smile at the shocked tone of his voice. “Well, then, I’ll get you some clothes. It’s about time we headed back. Before returning to Kinpa Palace, we’re going to have to crash at Gen’ei Palace for a while.”

She grinned and the kirin blinked again. Then he knelt down before her. With every movement, his back radiated an extraordinary luster.

He said, “I greet your Highness bearing the Mandate of Heaven.” He lowered his head and touched Youko’s foot with his horn. “I shall never part from thee, nor disobey thy decrees. My fealty I hereby pledge in covenant to thee.”

The whisper of a smile came to her lips. “I accept.”

This was, for Youko, the true beginning of her story.

*From The Chronicles of Kei
The Annals of the Red Child*



In the Spring of the Sixth Year of Yosei, the Reign of the Empress Jokaku, the Taiho Keiki fell grievously ill with the *Shitsudou*. The Capital Gyouten was ravaged by Fire and Pestilence. The Government waxed oppressive. Corruption and Calumny flourished. The Lamentations of the People cried out across the Land, saying, *The Gods of War will surely destroy Kei.*

In the Fifth Month of that Year, the Empress Jokaku repaired to Mount Hou and there sought Pardon from Heaven and renounced the Throne. And so she died and was buried at Senryou (泉隆). Her Reign lasted Six Years. Following her Death, she was given the Posthumous Name, *Ya*.

With the Abdication of the Late Empress Yo, Joei usurped the Throne. Joei falsely named herself Royal Kei and entered Gyouten. The Kingdom was cast into Chaos.

In the Seventh Month of the Seventh Year, the Empress Youko, the Royal Kei of the Kingdom of Kei, accended the Throne.

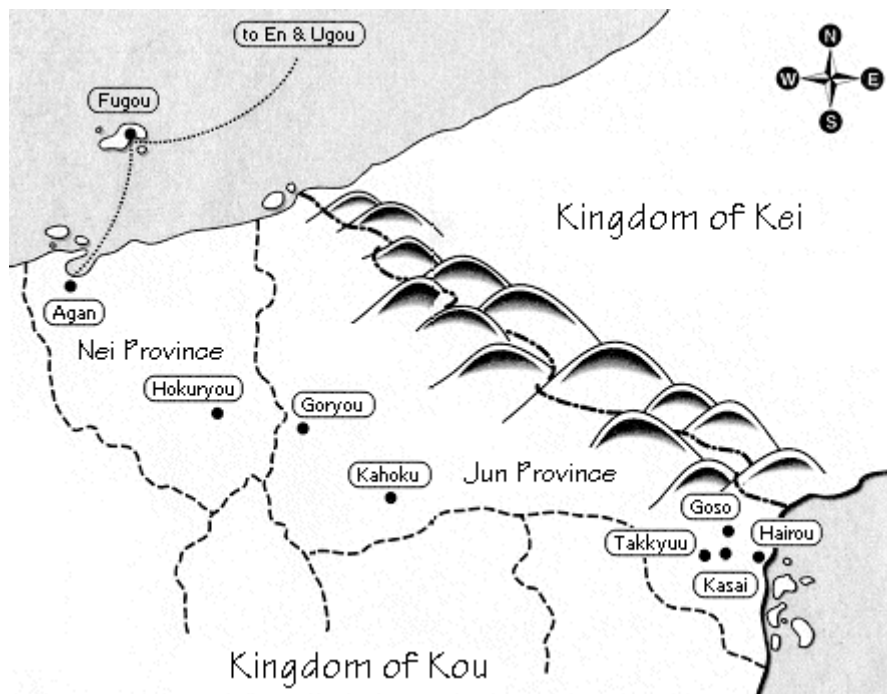
The Surname of the Empress Youko being *Nakajima* (中島), her Imperial Insignia being *Sekishi* (赤子), or the Imperial Child, also meaning the Red Child, she having been born a Taika. In the Third Month of the Seventh Year, the Empress returned from Yamato, quelling the Rebellion in the Seventh Month. Answering her Petition, the Royal En, King Shouryuu, deposed the Pretender, Joei.

In the Eighth Month of that Year, the Empress Youko ascended Mount Hou and there accomplished her Investiture. Her Name was recorded in the Census of Heaven, and she was granted the Title of *Royal Kei*. The Royal Kei re-interred the Late Empress Yo at Gyouten, appointed six new Ministers of State, and established the Government.

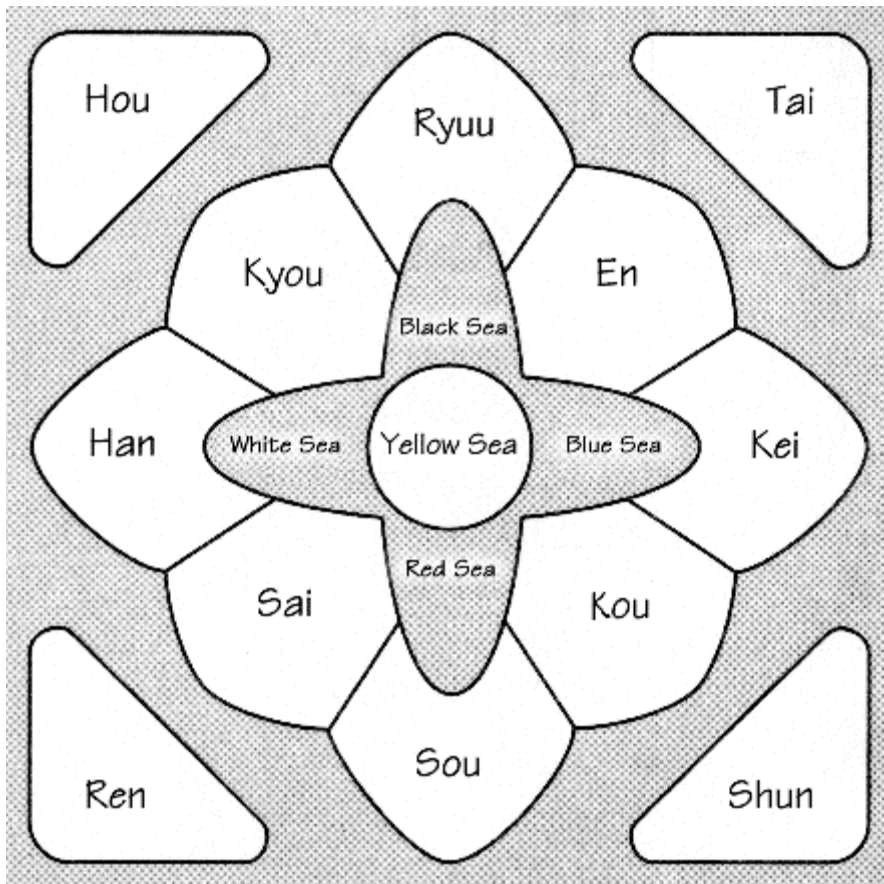
The Era of her Reign was designated *Sekiraku* (赤楽), from the First Character of the Imperial Insignia and the Name of her closest Counselor, Rakushun.

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 2). Words within translation notes or with no kanji are not included. Definitions are provided, if applicable.

Agan 阿岸【あがん】

A port city in Nei Province.

An'you 安陽【あんよう】

A county in Jun Province.

Azana 字【あざな】

An informal nickname adopted as a child, or a formal nickname given by one's parents.

Baku 麦【ばく】

A province in Kei.

Chou Sei 張清【ちょうせい】

Chuuzan 中山【ちゅうざん】

The Middle Mountain. An alternative name for Suusan.

Ei 瑛【えい】

A province in Kei.

En 雁【えん】

A kingdom located in the northeast.

Enki 延麒【えんき】

The name for a male kirin of En.

En Ou 延王【えんおう】

The Royal En.

Fugou 浮濠【ふごう】

An island north of Agan.

Furo 風呂【ふろ】

Bath.

Gen'ei Palace 幻英宮【げんえいきゅう】

The royal palace of En, home to the Royal En (En Ou).

Giou 偽王【ぎおう】

A fake king.

Goryou 午寮【ごりょう】

A city in Kou.

Gousou 傲霜【ごうそう】

The capital of Kou, located in Ki Province.

Gozan 五山【ござん】

The Five Mountains that are located in the center of the Juuni Kokki world. The mountains are: Suusan, Houzan, Kazan, Kakuzan, and Kouzan.

Gyoutei 僥帝【ぎょうてい】

The August God who watches over wealthy and prosperity.

Gyouten 堯天【ぎょうてん】

The capital of Kei, located in Ei Province.

Hairou 配浪【はいろう】

A town in Kou.

Haku 白【はく】

A district in Tei Province.

Han 漢【かん】

A term used to refer to the Chinese people.

Han [Kingdom] 範【はん】

A kingdom located in the west.

Hanjuu 半獣【はんじゅう】

A half-beast or chimera.

Heki Rakujin 壁落人【へきらくじん】

Hinasa 雛さ【ひなさ】

A fledgling kirin who has not reached adulthood.

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 its host's eyes are closed.

Hokuryou 北梁【ほくりょう】

A county in Nei Province.

Hou 芳【ほう】

A kingdom located in the northwestern corner.

Hourai 蓬萊【ほうらい】

What the people in the Juuni Kokki world call Japan.

Houryou 芳陵【ほうりょう】

A prefecture seat in En.

Houzan 蓬山【ほうざん】

The Mountain of Wormwood. This is the eastern mountain of the Five Mountains (Gozan).

Iryuu 維龍【いりゅう】

The capital of Sei Province.

Joei 舒榮【じょえい】

Jogaku 序学【じょがく】

A shire school.

Jokaku 舒覚【じょかく】

Joushou 上庠【じょうしょう】

A district academy.

Jouyuu 冗祐【じょうゆう】

Jun 淳【じゅん】

A province in Kou.

Kahoku 鹿北【かほく】

A region in Jun Province, consisting of An'you county.

Kaikyaku 海客【かいきやく】

Literally “visitors from the sea.” They are people from Japan who were caught up in a shoku and brought to the Juuni Kokki world.

Kakuraku 郭洛【かくらく】

A city in Kou.

Kakuzan 霍山【かくざん】

The Mountain of Immediacy. This is the southern mountain of the Five Mountains (Gozan).

Kankyuu 関弓【かんきゅう】

The capital of En, located in Sei Province.

Kasai 河西【かさい】

A town in Kou.

Kazan 華山【かざん】

The Mountain of Splendor. This is the western mountain of the Five Mountains (Gozan).

Kei 慶【けい】

A kingdom located in the east.

Keiki 景麒【けいき】

Ki 記【き】

A province in Kei.

Ki 喜【き】

A province in Kou.

Kimono 着物【きもの】

Generally a long, wide-sleeved Japanese robe.

Kinpa Palace 金波宮【きんぱきゅう】

The Palace of Golden Waves. Home to the Royal Kei.

Kirin 麒麟【きりん】

A sacred beast in the form of a unicorn that chooses the ruler of a country and then serves the chosen ruler.

Kitsuryou 吉量【きつりょう】

A flying horse with a red mane, white stripes, and golden eyes.

Kochou 蟲彫【こちょう】

An eagle-like youma with tawny wings and a horn in the center of its forehead.

Komatsu Naotaka 小松尚隆【こまつなおたか】

Kongouzan 金剛山【こんごうざん】

The four Adamantine Mountains encircling the Yellow Sea (Ou-kai).

Kou 巧【こう】

A kingdom located in the southeast.

Kouri 高里【こうり】

Kourin 埽麟【こうりん】

The name for a female kirin of Kou.

Koutei 黄帝【こうてい】

The God who watches over youma.

Kouzan 恒山【こうざん】

The Mountain of Permanence. This is the northern mountain of the Five Mountains.

Kunlun 崑崙【こんろん】

Mountains in China that run east to west along the northern edge of the Tibetan plateau.

Kyokai 虚海【きょかい】

Literally the “sea of emptiness.” Kaikyaku go through here to get from Japan to the Juuni Kokki world, but rarely vice versa.

Kyokukoku 極国【きょくこく】

The four Outlands located at the four corners of the Juuni Kokki world: the Kingdom of Tai, the Kingdom of Shun, the Kingdom of Ren, and the Kingdom of Hou.

Kyou 恭【きょう】

A kingdom located in the northwest.

Matsuyama Seizou 松山誠三【まつやませいぞう】

Nakajima Youko 中島陽子【なかじまようこ】

Nei 寧【ねい】

A province in Kou.

Ou-kai 黄海【おうかい】

The Yellow Sea. Located in the center of the Juuni Kokki world, this “sea” is actually an expanse of land.

Rakushun 楽俊【らくしゅん】**Ranka** 卵果【らんか】

A yellow egg-fruit that grows on the branch of a riboku or yaboku. All creatures in the Juuni Kokki world grow from ranka.

Ren 漣【れん】

A kingdom located in the southwestern corner.

Riboku 里木【りぼく】

The family tree that children and domesticated animals are born from.

Rokuta 六太【ろくた】**Ryuu** 柳【りゅう】

A kingdom located in the north.

Sai 才【さい】

A kingdom located in the southwest.

Saiho 宰輔【さいほ】

The rank of the kirin, the king’s counselor.

Sei 靖【せい】

A province in En.

Sei 征【せい】

A province in Kei.

Seioubo 西王母【せいおうぼ】

The Royal Mother of the West who watches over the Five Mountains.

Sekiraku 赤楽【せきらく】

The name of the era of Youko’s reign as the empress of Kei.

Sekishi 赤子【せきし】

The Imperial Child or the Red Child. Youko’s Imperial Insignia after she became the Empress of Kei.

Sen 錢【せん】

The unit of currency in the Juuni Kokki world.

Senryou 泉隆【せんりょう】

Shin 郷榎【しん】

A county of Rokou Prefecture.

Shirei 使令【しれい】

A youma that makes a pact to serve a kirin in exchange for the kirin's flesh when it dies.

Shitsudou 失道【しつどう】

The Loss of the Way. This illness falls upon a kirin when the kirin's king strays from the the Way and loses his rights to remain king.

Shizuoka 静岡【しずおか】

The capital city of Shizuoka Prefecture in Japan.

Shoku 蝕【しょく】

Literally “eclipse.” A tempest or great storm that sometime brings kaikyaku.

Shougaku 庠学【しょうがく】

A prefectural academy.

Shoujo 庠序【しょうじょ】

A prefectural polytechnic college.

Shouryuu 尚隆【しょうりゅう】

Shun 舜【しゅん】

A kingdom located in the southeastern corner.

Shuukoku 州国【しゅうこく】

The four Principalities positioned at the four ordinal points: the Kingdom of En, the Kingdom of Kou, the Kingdom of Sai, and the Kingdom of Kyou.

Shuuyou 首陽【しゅうよう】

A prefecture in Haku District.

Sou 奏【そう】

A kingdom located in the south.

Suiguu-tou 水禺刀【すいぐうとう】

The Water Monkey sword. This sword is the Imperial Regalia of the Kingdom of Kei, and only the true Royal Kei can wield it. When used correctly, it shows its master visions of the past, present, and future. When used incorrectly, the sword messes with its master's mind.

Suikou 翠篁【すいこう】

The Palace of Green Bamboo. Home to the Royal Kou.

Suukou 崇高【すうこう】

The Pinnacle. An alternative name for Suusan.

Suusan 崇山【すうさん】

The Supreme Mountain located in the center of the Juuni Kokki world. Also the middle mountain of the Five Mountains (Gozan). It is also called Suukou and Chuuzan.

Tai 戴【たい】

A kingdom located in the northeastern corner.

Taiho 台輔【たいほ】

A formal title given to the king's counselor, the kirin.

Taika 胎果【たいか】

The fruit of the womb. Taika refers to the people who were born from the womb of a woman, in other words, people not from the Juuni Kokki world.

Tai-ka 泰果【たいか】

The ranka bearing the Tai kirin.

Taiki 泰麒【たいき】

The name for a male kirin of Tai.

Taikoku 大国【たいこく】

The four Great Realms positioned at the cardinal points: the Eastern Kingdom of Kei, the Southern Kingdom of Sou, the Western Kingdom of Han, and the Northern Kingdom of Ryuu.

Tairin 泰麟【たいりん】

The name for a female kirin of Tai.

Taishan 泰山【たいしやん】

Former name of Houzan.

Takki 達姐【たつき】

Takkyuu 拓丘【たつきゅう】

The capital of Fuyou District.

Tatami 畳【たたみ】

Traditional Japanese straw floor coverings.

Tei 貞【てい】

A province in En.

Tentei 天帝【てんてい】

The Lord God the Heavens, the Divine Creator of the Juuni Kokki world.

Ugou 鳥号【うごう】

A port city in En.

Utei 禹帝【うてい】

The God who watches over floods.

Wa 倭【わ】

An ancient name for Yamato (Japan).

Yaboku 野木【やぼく】

The family tree that wild plants and animals (including youma) are born from.

Yamato 倭【やまと】

An ancient name for Japan.

Yasuda Hall 安田講堂【やすだこうどう】

Youma 妖魔【ようま】

Generally a creature with inhuman abilities, and usually resembles an animal. A beast, demon, monster, ghost, etc.

Youshou Shrine 容昌祠【ようしょうし】

Zankyaku 山客【ざんきやく】

Literally “visitors from the mountains.” They are people from China who get lost wandering around the Adamantine Mountains (Kongouzan).