TOKYOPOP

THE TWELVE KINGDOMS

SEA OF SHADOW

FUYUMI ONO

TM

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2022 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

https://archive.org/details/twelvekingdoms0000onof



THE TWELVE KINGDOMS: SEA OF SHADOW

STORY	Fuyumi Ono
ILLUSTRATOR	Akihiro Yamada
TRANSLATION & ENGLISH ADAPTATION	Alexander O. Smith & Elye J. Alexander
DESIGN AND LAYOUT	Erika Terriquez & Al-Insan Lashley
COVER DESIGN	Al-Insan Lashley
CREATIVE DIRECTOR	Anne Marie Horne
SENIOR EDITOR	Nicole Monastirsky
ASSOCIATE EDITOR	Peter Ahlstrom
DIGITAL IMAGING MANAGER	Chris Buford
PRODUCTION MANAGER	Elisabeth Brizzi
MANAGING EDITOR	Vy Nguyen
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF	Rob Tokar
PUBLISHER	Mike Kiley
PRESIDENT AND C.O.O.	John Parker
C.E.O. & CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER	Stuart Levy

First TOKYOPOP printing: February 2008

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the USA

© 1992/2001 Fuyumi Ono. All Rights Reserved.

First published in Japan in 1992/2001 by Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo. English publication rights arranged through Kodansha Ltd. English text copyright © 2006 TOKYOPOP Inc., Los Angeles, CA

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the copyright holders. This novel is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Ono, Fuyumi, 1960—
[Juunikokuki. English]
The twelve kingdoms / by Fuyumi Ono ; [illustrations, Yamada Akihiro ; translation and English Adaptation, Alexander O. Smith].

p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Audience: age 13–23
ISBN 978-1-4278-0257-6 (v. 1 : alk. paper)
I. Yamada, Akihiro. II. Smith, Alexander O. III. Title.
PN6790.J34J85613 2007
741.5'6973--dc22
[Fic]--

2006028162

THE TWELVE KINGDOMS

Fuyumi Ono

POP FICTION

The Twelve Kingdoms Map

N 4

芳
Hou

柳
Ryu

戴
Tai

恭
Kyou

黒海
Black Sea

雁
En

範
Han

白海
White Sea

黄海
Yellow Sea

青海
Blue Sea

慶
Kei

才
Sai

赤海
Red Sea

巧
Kou

漣
Ren

奏
Sou

舜
Shun

CHAPTER ONE

It was dark beyond darkness, deeper than the depths of night.

She stood—frozen, motionless—wrapped in the impenetrable gloom.

From somewhere in the darkness echoed the high-pitched sound of droplets hitting the surface of a pool, but she could not tell in what direction it lay or how far away it was. The echoes gave the impression that she was in a sealed cavern, but she knew this was not so.

The darkness was deep and vast, unbound by heaven or earth. Yet far off in that blackness something was suddenly set ablaze—a continually changing shape, a dancing, twisting flame.

Backlit by the reddish glare innumerable forms appeared, the silhouettes of many strange beasts running in a pack. They were dancing like the flame, coming toward her. There were all manner of creatures—apes, rats, birds—each vaguely familiar yet nothing ordinary. Some were red, some yellow, others blue; many were misshapen, and all were several times larger than normal. They loped forward, pawing the air with their forelimbs, some leaping and contorting as they ran. It was like the march of some lively ceremonial procession, with her as their sacrificial offering. They hurtled ever closer, mouths gaping, eager for the imminent blood rites.

She felt their animosity crash down on her, and she could smell their bloodlust. The forerunners of the pack were now no more than four hundred yards off and nearing rapidly. Even at this distance, she could see the glint of hunger in their eyes, but she could hear nothing—no voices, no footfalls—except the *drip, drip, drip* of water in a cave. And all she could do was stare.

They'll kill me.

Why couldn't she move? She would soon be torn to pieces, eaten alive, but she could only stand there frozen in place. There was nowhere to run; no way to fight.

She felt like all the blood in her body was flowing backward. She was dizzy and sick with the knowledge that she was about to die. Suddenly, she heard her heartbeat surge in her ears.

The terrible pack approached. They were only three hundred yards away . . .

Yoko shot up in bed.

Sweat beaded at her temples and stung her eyes. She blinked quickly a few times, then took a deep breath.

"I was dreaming," she said out loud. She had to check to be certain before she could relax. *Nope . . . no dripping water, no beasts.*

"It's only a dream," she said again. *Nothing more than a dream.* Though she'd had the same dream every night for the last month.

Yoko shook her head. The room was dark; her thick curtains blocked the morning light. She pulled the bedside clock close to her face. It was still too early to get up.

Her body felt heavy. When she lifted her hands and feet she felt resistance as if moving through thick liquid.

She'd first had the dream about four weeks ago. In the beginning, it was only a dream of darkness. She panicked in the gloom, but as hard as she strained, she couldn't move. Then on the third night, she saw the distant flame and awoke screaming. On the fifth night, she saw the shapes. At first, they were little more than faint smudges against the red light, but as the dream kept recurring she'd realized that the smudges were a pack of beasts coming closer.

Yoko reached for her favorite stuffed animal, a velvet bear, and hugged it tight. *They were so close this time.*

In the space of a month, the creatures had come all the way from the horizon to within a stone's throw. At that rate, by tomorrow or the day after, they would reach her for sure.

Then what? She shook her head. *Only a dream.*

Even if it haunted her sleep every night for a month, even if it progressed a little further each time, a dream was just a dream. Yet regardless of how many times she would say this, her pulse would race and her throat would grow sore from her ragged breathing.

Yoko was mentally and physically exhausted, but at last she forced herself to get up, change into her school uniform, and go downstairs. Even the simplest tasks seemed bothersome. She splashed water on her face and stumbled into the kitchen, which also served as the family dining room.

"Morning," she called to her mother, who was preparing breakfast at the sink.

"Up already? You're early," her mother said, turning to look at Yoko. Her quick glance turned into a glare, and a stern expression spread across her face.

"Yoko, it's getting redder, isn't it?"

For a moment, Yoko froze, unsure of what her mother was talking about. Then, she began to redo the braid in her long hair. Ordinarily, she tidied her hair before coming to the breakfast table, but this morning she had just stuck a hairpin in the braid she'd made before going to sleep.

"Why don't you try dyeing it a little?"

Yoko shook her head. Loose hairs waved about and tickled her cheeks.

In a country where everyone's hair was black, Yoko's red hair definitely stood out. It had always been light-colored, and if she got too much sunlight or spent too long in the pool, it would lighten even more. She preferred to grow it long down her back, but growing it out made the tips even lighter to the point where it looked like she was bleaching it.

"You could always cut it shorter?"

Yoko hung her head and didn't respond, but just finished braiding her hair in record time. A good, tight three-plaited braid always made her tresses look darker, and that was exactly what she needed.

"Whose hair is that anyway? It certainly isn't mine." Her mother sighed. "Your teacher asked me the other day, you know. He wanted to know if you were really born that way. You ought to dye it black."

"But the school doesn't let us dye our hair."

Her mother rolled her eyes. "Then why don't you cut it? It wouldn't stand out so much then."

Yoko looked down at the table.

"You know, it's very important for girls to be tidy," her mother said as she poured a cup of coffee. "Don't stand out. Don't cause trouble. Even if it's not your fault, people will think you're trying to rebel or something. They'll get the wrong idea about what kind of person you are."

Yoko used her finger to trace a pattern on the tablecloth.

"Some people might think you've fallen in with the wrong crowd. You don't want them to think you're the kind who plays around, do you? I'll give you the money—just go get it cut. Please?"

Yoko quietly sighed.

"Yoko? Are you listening to me?"

"Yeah," she replied, her eyes wandering over to look out the window. The winter sky was a depressing shade of gray. It was the middle of February, and the days were still bitterly cold.

Yoko attended an all girls' school. It was her father's pick and utterly average in every way. Actually, the fact that it was an all girls' school was the only thing that set it apart from the other private schools.

Yoko's middle school grades were above average, and she could have aimed for a more prestigious high school. In fact,

her teacher had recommended a different school, but her father would not budge from his position on her education.

The school he'd chosen was close to home; it had neither a particularly bad reputation nor a particularly spectacular one, which apparently was what pleased Yoko's father. However, Yoko's mother would have preferred another school for her daughter, but as the dutiful wife she had accepted her husband's decision. With both parents in lockstep, Yoko had no say in the matter.

There was a school a little farther away with a much nicer uniform, but Yoko couldn't bring herself to plead with her parents, and so she quietly obeyed. Perhaps that was why now, even after she had been at her school for almost a year, she still felt no particular attachment to the place.

"Morning!" a chipper high-pitched voice called out to Yoko as she entered the classroom.

A group of girls were waving in her direction. One came running over. "Nakajima! Did you do the math homework?"

"Yeah." Yoko blinked.

"Can I look?"

Yoko nodded. She sat down at her desk by the window and took out her homework from her schoolbag. Several girls gathered around her desk and began copying down what she had written.

"You're such a good student—no wonder you're the class president!"

Yoko smiled wanly.

"No, really; you're way better than I am. I hate doing homework. I always forget!" another girl said.

"Yeah, and when I try to do it, I don't remember anything and it takes me forever, and I always just end up falling asleep. Smart people have it so easy."

"Bet it only takes you a sec to do this, huh, Nakajima?"

Yoko quickly shook her head. "N-no, not at all."

"So, you just *like* doing homework then?"

"Hardly!" Yoko replied, forcing a smile. "Just, my mom's really strict." It wasn't the truth, but it was easier to lie. "She checks to make sure I did *everything* before she lets me go to bed. It's a total drag."

In fact, Yoko's mother didn't want her to study as much as she did. She cared about Yoko's grades, of course, but instead of sending her to an afternoon cram school, she preferred to have Yoko help with the housework. Work-before-study was her policy. Yoko did do all of her homework, but it wasn't out of any love for learning. She was just afraid of the teachers getting angry with her if she didn't.

"Wow, so your mom's like an educational slave driver?!"

Yoko smiled softly. At least the other girls were willing to talk with her. "Yeah, she's always on my case. 'Did you finish your homework?' and 'What grade did you get?'"

Another girl nodded. "Totally, totally! My mom's the same way! As soon as I walk in the door, it's like 'study time!' I bet she didn't study this much when *she* was in school!"

"Yeah!" Yoko agreed, relieved she was no longer the focus of the conversation.

"Hey, it's Sugimoto," one of the girls whispered.

Another girl had just walked into the room. Everyone in the class shot glances at her and then looked away. The tension in the room was palpable.

Ignoring Sugimoto was a game the class had played for about half a year now. Head hung low, Sugimoto glanced up to survey the room, then shuffled over toward Yoko and sat down at the desk next to hers.

"Good morning, Nakajima," she said hesitantly.

Yoko nearly replied out of habit but managed to swallow her words at the last moment. One time without thinking, she had responded to Sugimoto, and then the rest of the class had ridiculed her for days.

So Yoko kept quiet and pretended she hadn't heard the greeting. The sound of suppressed laughter drifted from the nearby desks.

Sugimoto sat with her head hanging, looking miserable, and glancing over at Yoko as if she were about to say something.

Yoko talked with the girls around her while feeling Sugimoto's glare the whole time. Yoko felt bad for the girl, but if she took pity on her, the other classmates wouldn't waste any time making Yoko the next victim.

"Um . . . Nakajima?"

Yoko pretended not to notice, then proceeded to feel guilty about it. She just didn't know what else she could do.

"Nakajima," Sugimoto said again.

The surrounding conversations ceased, and Yoko could feel the cold stares of the entire class. Unable to ignore Sugimoto

anymore, Yoko meekly glanced at her neighbor, but still did not verbally respond.

"Um . . . did you do the math homework?" asked Sugimoto.

The class erupted into peals of laughter.

"Kind of," said Yoko.

"Can I take a look? Please?"

Yoko turned to look at her friends who all stared back without saying a word.

Yoko swallowed, trying to get the bitter taste out of her mouth. "There're still some parts on it I need to fix."

The other girls were not impressed by Yoko's roundabout refusal, and they let her know it.

"You're so nice, Nakajima!"

You're a pushover, they mean.

Yoko slouched down in her chair.

"Just tell her to bug off, Nakajima!" chimed another.

"Yeah, what gives her the right to talk to you?"

"Some dummies just don't get it unless you tell it to their face!"

Yoko didn't know how to respond. She lacked the courage to disappoint everyone around her, but at the same time, she didn't have the nerve to say something mean to the girl sitting next to her. Yoko affected a sheepish grin and shrugged her shoulders.

"You really are too nice, Nakajima. That's why *certain people* always bug you for stuff."

"You think?" she squeaked.

"You know it!"

The room filled with cruel laughter.

"Don't lend Sugimoto your notes—they'll get all dirty!"

"That'd suck!"

"Not as much as *she* does!"

Everyone laughed again. Yoko joined them while eyeing the lonely girl in the chair next to her. Sugimoto's head was bent over her desk, and tears ran down her cheeks.

It's Sugimoto's fault too, Yoko tried to convince herself. *She could've chosen not to to act like a victim all the time.*

Darkness . . . without earth or sky.

Again—the hollow, high-pitched *drip, drip, drip* of water.

Yoko stood there in the darkness, facing the faint, far-off flame once again. Countless shapes writhed and shifted before the light—a pack of bizarre beasts, monstrosities, each leaping and running. They were coming straight for her.

The creatures were still perhaps two hundred yards away, but their incredible size made them seem frightfully close. A giant ape, its mouth open in a howl of raucous laughter, its reddish fur reflecting the light of the distant blaze, was close enough that she could see its muscles contract and stretch with every wild leap.

She could not move or speak or even breathe. All she could do was stare so hard and fierce at the pack's approach that her eyeballs ached from the strain. Running, leaping, dancing, their animosity struck her like a fierce wind, stealing her breath.

I have to wake up.

The dream had to end before they reached her. But if she were able to wake through sheer willpower alone, she would have done so long before.

The beasts closed the distance by half.

I have to wake up.

She ground her teeth as agonizing frustration knifed through her. The fear roiling inside her felt as if it might actually burst through her skin. Her heart raced, her breath came in ragged gasps, and the sound of her own blood crashed in her ears like a stormy sea.

I have to find a way out.

Suddenly, she felt something above her—a new source of hatred descending with such force that it threatened to crush her on the spot. And, for the first time in the dream, she was able to move. She looked upward.

She saw brown-black wings, then strong legs, and feet with horribly sharp talons reaching toward her.

Even the *thought* of escape left her as the tide of adrenaline surged again. Yoko screamed.

"Nakajima!"

The shout triggered some primal defense mechanism in Yoko, who just started to run. Only after she had sprinted to the door did she pause to look around.

Her teacher stood at the head of the class with a bemused look on her face, which was duplicated on the faces of all of Yoko's classmates. A pregnant pause filled the air and then was

replaced by an explosion of laughter. Yoko breathed a sigh of relief, then turned beet red.

She had been sleeping in class.

She hadn't been getting enough rest at night because of the nightmare, and when she did get dreamless sleep it was light and fitful. She was always tired and fuzzy-headed and often nodded off in class, but this was the first time she had actually dreamed.

The teacher angrily approached Yoko's desk. For the most part, the teachers at this school seemed to like Yoko, but for whatever reason this teacher had made it a point to be harsh. Yoko bit her lip.

"Nakajima!" The teacher slammed an English textbook down on the desk. "I've had students take naps in my class before, but they at least have the courtesy to remember where they are when they wake up. Return to your seat at once."

Yoko hung her head and made her way back to her chair, where the teacher loomed.

"Why come to school? If you're tired, sleep at home. If you don't like class, I see no reason for you to have to suffer here."

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

The teacher tapped Yoko's desk with the edge of the book. "Or maybe you're just too busy running around at night to sleep?"

A few of the students giggled, some of them Yoko's friends. The loudest laughter came from the seat next to her.

The teacher reached over and gave Yoko's long braid an insulting tug. "And what about this hair? Natural, eh?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I see," she said, disbelieving. "You know, when I was in school there was a girl in my class with hair like yours. You remind me of her." The teacher smiled unkindly. "Of course *she* was *bleaching* her hair—not like you, of course. She was disciplined in her junior year and had to leave. I wonder what she's doing now?"

About half the class looked as if they were fighting to hold back their laughter.

"Tell me, do you want to be a part of this class or not?"

"I do."

"Really? Then you will stand until class is done. You should be able to stay awake that way." The teacher turned away with a sneer and made her way back to the lectern at the front of the room.

And so, Yoko stood by her desk for the rest of the class, surrounded by the sounds of her friends sniggering into their textbooks.

When classes were let out for the day, Yoko was called into the teachers' room. Apparently, word of the incident in English class had been making the rounds of the faculty, too.

"Some of the teachers think you've been going out at night, you know," Mr. Matsuzaki, her homeroom teacher, informed her with a disapproving look. "Clearly, you've been staying up entirely too late, at the very least. Do you have some kind of explanation?"

She paused. "No, sir."

She couldn't just tell him about the dream.

"Are you watching television late at night?"

"N-no, it's just . . ." Yoko hesitated, racking her brain for some excuse. "My scores on the mid-years weren't so good, and . . ."

He relaxed. "Oh, was that it? So you've been studying! Well, I suppose I bear a bit of the blame myself, in that case."

He seemed to have bought her story. Yoko breathed an inward sigh of relief.

"But, Nakajima . . ."

Yoko stiffened. "Yes?"

"You can study all you want at night, but you still won't learn anything if you do so at the expense of paying attention in class."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"It's not something for which you need to apologize. But you must understand, Nakajima, it's easy for people to get the wrong idea about you, with your hair and all. Can't you do something about that?"

"I was thinking of having it cut today."

Her teacher nodded. "It's tough, I know. You probably want to grow it long. Most girls do. But, I really think this is for your own good. Some of the teachers, well, they fancy you're dyeing your hair and going out to nightclubs."

"I know, I'm sorry."

"That'll be all, Nakajima. You can go home now."

"Thank you, sir," Yoko said, nodding.

That was when she heard the voice . . .

"At last," said a voice. Strangely, Yoko's nostrils began to fill with the faint scent of a sea breeze, even though they were miles from the shore.

Mr. Matsuzaki frowned, staring past her. Yoko turned to see a young man standing in the doorway. She'd never seen him before, and his appearance would have made anyone stare.

"It *is* you!" he exclaimed, gazing at her with an inscrutable expression on his face. The man was older than Yoko, perhaps in his late twenties, and was wearing a kimono-like robe with long sleeves. His face was stern with exaggerated features like a *noh* mask, and his shimmering golden hair was so long it nearly reached his knees.

"Who are you?" the teacher demanded.

The young man didn't seem to hear him, but proceeded to do something that surprised Yoko even further. Stepping toward her, he knelt and bowed his head low.

"I have been searching for you."

"Is this some friend of yours, Nakajima?"

Yoko, standing there dumbfounded, shook her head. "No!"

Both she and the teacher were at a loss. Uncertain of what to do, they stood staring until the man rose up again.

"Please, you must come with me," the man insisted.

"Huh?"

"Nakajima, who is this fellow?"

That was the same question Yoko wanted to ask. "I really don't know!" she said, giving the teacher a pleading look. The

few other faculty members remaining in the room started gathering around, curious to know what was going on.

"Okay, pal, who are you?" her teacher demanded sternly. "Are you aware that no one unassociated with the school is allowed on the property? Don't make me call the police!"

The strange man seemed to notice him for the first time, but his face was expressionless. He obviously wasn't concerned about trespassing.

"This has nothing to do with you." The man shot a cold look at the teachers gathered there. "Nor any of you. You *will not* interfere."

His voice was so forceful that all of the teachers collectively flinched. Yoko, no less surprised, stared back at him.

"I will explain everything later," he told Yoko a bit more gently. "Please, you must come with me."

"I'm sorry, but—"

She was about to ask him who he was, when she heard another voice say a word she had never heard before.

"*Taiho.*"

She thought, from the way the word was said, that it was someone's name. The stranger looked up. The voice was calling him.

"What?" The man's brows furrowed and his eyes shifted as if he saw someone, but Yoko saw no one.

She heard the voice again. It said, "We were followed."

The man's face twisted into a frown. He nodded and grabbed Yoko's wrist.

"Forgive me, but we are in danger here. This way."

"D-danger?"

"There is no time to explain."

Something about the tone of the man's voice made Yoko cringe.

"Enemies approach."

"Enemies?" she said, feeling anxiety well in her chest. She heard the voice again. This time it was coming from right beside her.

"Taiho, they are here."

Yoko spun around, but again, there was no one. Her teacher began to say something—but just then the window closest to Yoko, which faced the river behind the school, suddenly shattered. She closed her eyes and flinched at the sound of tinkling glass.

"What was that?!" Mr. Mitsuzaki shouted, and Yoko opened her eyes again as her teacher ran to look out the broken window. A cold wind blew in off the river, and with it came a strange odor like that of rotting fish.

The floor was covered in fragments of shattered glass. Yoko had escaped unharmed only because the strange man had shielded her.

"What—" she said, completely lost.

"I did say it was dangerous," the man said coolly. He grabbed Yoko's arm again. "This way."

Panic setting in, Yoko tried to wrench her arm away, but his grasp was unyielding. She began to totter and the man put his hand on her shoulder, steadying her.

Mr. Matsuzaki tried to get between Yoko and the man. "You! What are you doing?!"

The man looked at her teacher threateningly. When he spoke, his voice was cold. "This has nothing to do with you. You *will* stand aside."

"Yeah, wise guy? Is that so? And what is it exactly that you want with my students? Why is your friend outside breaking our windows?" her teacher challenged the stranger. When there was no reaction, he shifted the focus of interrogation to Yoko. "What's going on here, Nakajima? I *demand* an explanation."

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head while the strange man continued to tug at her.

"We must leave this place!"

"No."

Yoko kept trying to twist her arm free of the stranger's grasp. If Mr. Matsuzaki thought she was involved with this man, she was doomed.

"Taiho," came the same voice from above.

Whoever it was sounded nervous. The teachers peered around, trying to find the source of the voice.

The man grimaced. "Truly stubborn," he spat and dropped to his knees.

Before she could react, he reached out and grabbed Yoko's feet—not aggressively, but submissively, as if in some foreign gesture of respect.

"To serve you always in utmost loyalty—this is my pledge," he said, almost too quickly for Yoko to understand the words.

She looked at his face and saw that he was staring at her expectantly.

"Say that you accept."

"Accept? Accept what?!"

"If you hold your life dear," he barked, "say you accept!"

Yoko felt her mouth form the words: "I accept."

And then she watched, astounded, as the man took her foot and placed it squarely on his lowered forehead.

The teachers shouted in outrage.

Yoko was stunned. "What—?"

All of a sudden, Yoko felt as if something was moving rapidly *through* her, and her vision blackened momentarily.

"Nakajima, what's the meaning of this?!" her teacher roared, his face red.

Just then, there was a low reverberating sound, like the thudding that accompanies a large earthquake, and what glass was left in the schoolroom windows turned a cloudy white.



An instant later, the glass came crashing into the room like a mad cascade of water. Broken fragments surged around Yoko in a wave of scintillating light. She closed her eyes and threw up her arms, covering her face as the glass blew into her. The sound should have been deafening, but only silence reached Yoko's ears.

Her body clenched in anticipation, but oddly the glass didn't actually hurt. It was only uncomfortable, like being pelted by a thousand tiny rocks. Once Yoko felt them stop, she opened her eyes and saw the teachers' room transformed.

Light swirled around the room, reflecting off the innumerable glittering shards that blanketed the floor. Here and there the teachers lay hunched and twisting in pain. Mr. Matsuzaki was sprawled at her feet, hands over his head.

When she reached to help him, she saw the hundreds of glass shards protruding from his side and back.

She heard the screams then, finally, as though all the sounds in the world had been somehow delayed.

Yoko looked down at her own body. Though she had been standing right in the midst of the surge of glass, she had barely a scratch.

Her teacher grabbed her leg, his voice panicked. "You . . . what have you done?"

The strange man knelt and pushed the teacher's hand aside. "We must go." He too was unharmed.

Yoko shook her head, trying to make sense of everything. If she went with him, they would definitely think that she was his friend. Yet when he tugged on her hand, she did not resist. She found herself *wanting* to leave. Not because she believed his talk of "enemies," but because the thought of staying in that room with the screams of the wounded and the thick smell of blood was too much for her to bear. Together, they ran.

In the hallway, they bumped into another instructor who had come running when he heard the commotion.

"What's going on in there?" the man shouted. He was a middle-aged math teacher who only worked at the school part-time. Yoko didn't even know his name. His eyes locked on the strange man standing next to Yoko and he furrowed his brow. Before she could

say anything, the stranger raised his hand and pointed back into the room.

"Bring aid quickly. There are injuries." Then he headed down the hall, tugging the bewildered Yoko behind him.

The teacher shouted something after them, but Yoko couldn't make out what he said.

The man began to lead her up the stairs. She wanted to go home more than anything in the world, but they just continued upward. "Where are we going?" she asked finally.

"We're headed for the roof!"

"But why?"

"If we go down, there will be trouble."

She frowned. "What trouble? You don't want to be seen?"

"You would endanger innocent people? This has nothing to do with them." The man opened the door leading to the roof and pulled Yoko through, hard.

This has nothing to do with them.

Did that mean it had something to do with *her?* Who were these "enemies" he was talking about? She wanted to ask, but felt as if she had missed her opportunity. So she just let herself be led by the hand, eventually emerging onto the roof feeling wobbly and off balance.

As soon as she passed through the door, Yoko heard an eerie cry from behind her. She whirled at the sound—a voice like the screech of rusted metal tearing apart in a storm.

Above the door hung an enormous shape: tremendous umber wings, a crooked beak, and a glistening green body. It appeared to be some kind of giant bird, the largest Yoko had ever seen; its

wings must have spanned fifteen feet from tip to tip. The thing rose up and yowled like a deranged cat.

"Wait—" Yoko froze.

It's the bird from my dream!

Again the creature's strange cry rolled across the roof of the building, and with it came a blast of animosity as tangible as a hot wind. Yoko staggered.

It was nearing dusk, and the clouded sky was thick and dark overhead. From a fold in the clouds near the horizon, a sharp ray of reddish light illuminated the hawk-like bird with an eerie glow. She saw then that the creature had horns. It shook its head and gave a mighty beat of its wings. A foul-smelling gust buffeted her.

Yoko was paralyzed with fear. She could only stand helplessly as she had in her dream, watching as the great bird's body lifted. It rose easily, its vast pinions thudding—then suddenly the angle of its wings changed, and Yoko realized with a strange detachment that it was preparing to dive.

The thing's muscular legs stretched forth and its fearfully sharp talons pointed straight at her. Before she could regain her balance, the bird came thundering down. She didn't even have time to scream.

Yoko's eyes grew wide and unseeing. She felt a sharp blow to her arm and knew its talons were ripping into her flesh.

"Hyoki!" cried a voice. She did not know whose voice it was or from whence it came; her eyes registered only a deep, impenetrable red.

Blood.

Oddly, she could feel no pain. She closed her eyes. It was all so much easier than she had thought. Why had she always been so afraid of dying?

"Come to your senses!" a voice shouted.

Hands shook her roughly by the shoulders. Yoko blinked and came to. The strange man stared into her eyes. She felt concrete at her back, and her left arm was pressed hard up against a metal fence.

"This is no time for sleep!"

Yoko sprang up. She was near the roof's edge quite some distance from where she had stood only a moment before.

A furious cry pierced her ears, and she saw that the giant bird had landed in front of the door. With each fierce flap of its wings, a gust of wind strong enough to bowl her over shot across the rooftop. She stumbled and fell to one knee.

Yoko saw that the bird's talons were plunged deep into the concrete of the rooftop. They were stuck firmly; the bird was trapped. It shook its head like an irritated horse shooing a fly.

Yoko saw another beast clinging to its back. This new creature was like a panther, yet covered in thick rusty-red hair.

"W-what?" Yoko stammered. "What is that thing?"

"I told you we were in danger."

The man dragged Yoko to her feet again. Her eyes darted back and forth between the two beasts. The winged monster was now locked in combat with the red panther-thing.

"Kaiko!"

As though summoned, a woman emerged from the concrete at Yoko's feet. Her skin was draped in feathers, her arms long

and arced like a bird's wings. She held in her hands a jeweled sword encased in an exquisitely adorned scabbard. The sword's hilt shone with gold, and on the end of its jewel-encrusted scabbard a single large gem hung from a cord. Yoko was certainly no expert in such matters, but it seemed obvious to her that the sword was entirely ornamental and unfit for actual use.

The man took the sword from the winged woman's hands and thrust it toward Yoko.

"What?" She gaped.

"This is yours. Use it," he commanded

"Me? Use this?" She blinked, baffled. "Not you?"

The man shot her a displeased look and thrust the sword toward her again.

"I have no interest in waving swords."

"And I *do?* Aren't you supposed to save me with that?"

He shrugged. "Regretfully, I don't know how to use one."

"What?!"

Reluctantly Yoko took the sword in her hands. It was far heavier than she had expected; she doubted she could swing it.

"But I don't know how to use it either!" she protested.

"You would prefer to be killed?" he asked calmly.

"Of course not!"

"Then use it."

The roaring confusion in Yoko's head rose to a crescendo. She knew with every fiber in her being that she didn't want to be killed—yet that did not give her the courage to try to fight the monstrous bird with this outlandish sword. It would be a hopeless gesture, anyway. She had neither the strength nor

the skill. She heard the stranger telling her she could wield the weapon, echoed by a voice in her head insisting that she could not.

While asking herself if there was another way, she drew back her arm in frustration, in desperation; the sword flew through the air and clattered on the ground.

"Foolish girl!" shouted the man, his voice a mix of anger and surprise.

Yoko had thrown the sword halfheartedly at the bird. Much to her surprise, it had actually gone far enough to lightly graze the thing's wing before falling to the concrete with a clang.

"Of all the—Hyoki!" The man shouted, and Yoko fancied she could hear him clicking his tongue in displeasure. At his call, the red-furred beast disengaged itself from the bird's back and leapt down to the rooftop. In one swift motion, it scooped up the sword with its fangs and shot like an arrow straight for Yoko.

The man took the sword from the creature's jaws. They both looked over at the struggling bird. "Can you hold it?" he asked the panther-thing.

"I believe so." Incredibly, the creature he had called "Hyoki" answered him with human speech.

The man grunted, nodded, and then shouted to the waiting bird-woman. "Kaiko!"

The woman finished emerging from the roof just as a hail of concrete fragments clattered around them. The great bird had freed itself from the rooftop, leaving deep furrows where its claws had been stuck.

Hyoki whirled and leapt, clinging to the bird-monster as it slowly lifted into the air. The bird-woman Kaiko also sprang to intercept, and Yoko saw that her legs were human-like, but covered in feathers, and she had a long tail.

"Hankyo! Jusak'!" the strange man bellowed.

Two more beasts arrived, answering the man's summons. One was an enormous hound, the other something that looked like a gigantic baboon. "Hankyo, stay here. Jusak', take her!"

"As you command," the two beasts answered as one, bowing their heads.

The man nodded his approval and turned his back on them. Without a moment's hesitation, he walked over to the fence and disappeared.

"What? Wait!" Yoko cried.

The baboon creature reached out his arm, put a paw on Yoko and, before she could protest, hugged her close to his hairy side. Ignoring her screams, the one called Jusak' tucked her under his arm and leapt over the fence to the edge of the roof.

The baboon-thing jumped from the roof to the ground, and from the ground to the top of a telephone pole. He ran with such an incredible swiftness that with each leap and bound Yoko felt as if they were flying through a hurricane.

Despite the creature's speed, the journey seemed to go on forever. Yoko was desperate for a moment's pause when at last they reached the seacoast, far from the town where she lived.



Stopping by a low seawall that faced the harbor, the baboon set Yoko's feet on the ground and disappeared without so much as a word.

While she struggled to catch her breath, she looked around for the creature. Instead she saw the strange man with golden hair emerge from between the concrete pilings of the seawall. In his hand he bore the jeweled sword.

"You made it," he said.

Yoko nodded, bewildered. She felt dizzy, but whether it was motion sickness from the wild journey or merely confusion from the string of unusual events, she couldn't say. The strength left her legs and she plopped down on the ground.

Tears began to stream from her eyes.

"This is not the time for weeping," said the man, kneeling next to her.

She looked at him, begging mutely for some kind of explanation, but it didn't seem like he was in an explaining mood.

Yoko cast her eyes downward. "That thing . . . it's coming?"

The man nodded. "Because you would not kill it. Hyoki and the others can hinder its progress as best they can, but they cannot hold it for long."

"That horrible bird-creature—what was it?"

"A *kochou.*"

"Kochou? What's that?"

"What you saw."

That was hardly an explanation, but she couldn't bring herself to scold him. "Who are you? Why did you save me?"

"I am Keiki."

Yoko sighed. *So what does* taiho *mean*, she wondered, but she had already given up on trying to get any information from this man. She wanted to escape, to get away from him, and go home as quickly as she could. But she had left her coat and bag at school and did not think she could return alone.

"Are you finished?" the stranger asked.

She hunched over. "Finished?"

"May we leave, is my meaning."

"Leave? To where?" she asked.

"Over There."

Yoko had no idea where exactly "Over There" was, but she couldn't believe it was any better than right here. Dazed, she continued sitting.

Impatiently, the man grabbed her hand, pulled her to her feet, then hurried her along the seawall. How many times had she been dragged along like this in the last hour? Why did this man keep forcing her to go places without offering the slightest explanation for anything?

"Wait!" she yelled.

"We've already waited too long. Our lead diminishes by the moment!"

"Where are we going? How far is it?"

"If we go directly, the journey will take a day."

"I can't do that!"

"What?" he barked.

Yoko flinched but remained firm. There was no way she was going anywhere else with this stranger, and such a long journey was entirely out of the question. What would she tell

her parents? They barely let her go out in the evening with her friends. There was no way they would let her go on some day-long excursion.

"I can't—" She stopped short, on the verge of tears. She didn't understand what was going on, and this strange man kept demanding things of her with that stern manner of his. But if she cried, he would probably just scold her. So she gritted her teeth and held back the tears. Dropping to the ground, she sat curled in a ball with her arms wrapped around her knees. Then she heard that voice again.

"Taiho."

The man looked up into the air. "Ah. Kochou?"

"Yes."

Yoko felt a chill run down her spine. The strange man's words could only mean one thing: that monstrous bird was nearby.

"Please, help!" She grabbed the man's hand as he tried to pass her the sword.

"If you value your life, take this."

"But I can't use it."

"*Only* you can use it."

"I . . . no, really, I can't!"

"Then I will lend a *hinman*. Joyu!"

From the ground near Yoko's feet emerged a man's face—pale as though it were made of rock and sunken eyes the color of dried blood. The head pulled farther out of the ground, yet no body followed. Instead, a translucent blob trailed after it. It was like some horrible jellyfish, and it was sliding right for her.

Yoko screamed and turned to run, but Keiki grabbed her arm. She struggled, but his grip was too firm. Then, something heavy fell on the back of her neck. It was the oozing head sliming down inside the collar of her uniform.

She screamed and reached behind to claw at the thing on her back.

"Get it off!"

Keiki grabbed her other hand.

"Stop! No!" Yoko struggled wildly.

"Calm yourself!" he shouted.

"I . . . Why are you doing this to me?!"

Something that felt like cold entrails slithered down her arm, and at the same time something pushed at the back of her neck. Her knees gave out and she fell to the ground. Still facedown, she used both of her hands to scrape at the back of her neck.

"What happened?" she asked, horrified.

"Joyu has attached."

"*Attached?!*" Yoko sat up and ran her hands down her arms, then touched gingerly at her neck. She could feel no trace of the horrible creature; the slimy sensation was gone.

"Joyu knows the ways of the sword. Now take this," he commanded coldly, handing her the bejeweled blade still in its scabbard. "The kochou is swift. It, at least, you must cut down, or we will be taken for sure."

"At least? You mean . . ." *There are other things chasing us!* Yoko wondered what else was coming. It was all too much like her dream. "I can't do this!" she exclaimed. "And what about that Joyu, or hinman, or whatever it was? Where did it go?"

He did not respond. Instead, he looked up at the sky.
"The kochou comes."

Yoko had barely begun to turn her head when she heard the monster's eerie scream from behind. Keiki pushed the sword into her hands as the giant bird plummeted from the sky in a killing dive. Yoko screamed, and in one moment of horrible clarity, she knew she could not escape. The creature was coming down too fast. She didn't know how to use a sword; she didn't have the courage to fight. She was defenseless.

The kochou's dagger-like talons spread until they filled Yoko's vision. She wanted desperately to close her eyes, but she could not. Instead, she was surrounded: a white flash, a harsh sound like rocks breaking on rocks. The heavy claws swung down with the weight of a woodcutter's ax—and stopped short just before they reached her face.

To Yoko's amazement, the jeweled sword, half pulled from its scabbard, was gripped by her own hands. She was fending off the beast. While something in the back of her mind screamed in confusion, she saw her arm draw the sword the rest of the way and, in the same motion, cut at the kochou's legs.

A gout of crimson blood sprayed across her face. It was warm and sticky.

Yoko stood there, stunned. How was this possible? She wasn't wielding the sword; her hands and feet moved of their own accord.

She watched as she cut off one of the kochou's thick legs, even as the creature beat its wings madly in a vain attempt to evade the stroke. More blood splashed over her, and she felt something warm slide from her chin, down her neck, and under her collar. She trembled at the sensation. Her legs spasmed, and she jumped aside to dodge another crimson spray.

Gravely wounded, the kochou had somehow managed to rise back into the air. It only went a short distance before it dove back down at her, shrieking with rage. Yoko sidestepped and cut at its wings, deftly avoiding its slashing claws. Every time her arms moved she felt a cold, slimy sensation course through her body.

Joyu!

The giant bird, its right wing badly injured, crashed to the ground, screaming.

Yoko understood then what was happening. *The hinman, Joyu, is controlling my body!* With athletic skill and precision Yoko had never before possessed, it was fighting the bird through her.

Grounded, the beast flapped its wings and scraped the hard rock of the seawall. It beat its feathers on earth and stone, crawling ever closer toward Yoko. Her body moved swiftly in response. Darting to one side, she thrust the sword deep into the monster's breast and then just as quickly pulled it out.

Yoko leapt back. Blood and gore covered her from head to toe, and she could still feel the terrible resistance of flesh and bone against the blade in her hands.

She ran back to the kochou, stabbing its tattered wing as it lay writhing on the ground. Then, raising the sword high, she

struck again, hacking the wing clean off. Without pause, she whirled around and went for the creature's head. A scream erupted from its beak, followed by a froth of bloody foam that stained the rock beneath it red.

"No, please, stop!" Yoko shouted, her mouth still bowing to her will.

The giant bird was trying to turn over, flapping its one good wing, but it could not get off the ground. Yoko's sword arm avoided the noisy sweep of feathers and thrust the blade into the creature's chest. She closed her eyes as quickly as she could, but still she could feel the resistance of the kochou's body against the steel. Once more, she felt herself raise the sword above her head; this time she swiftly brought it down on the creature's neck. It cut deep, stopping at the neck bone.

Relentlessly, her arm wrested the sword out of the sticky blood and flesh of the neck and then swung again, finishing the job. The red-stained head dropped to the ground. She cleaned the blade on the still-twitching wing—and suddenly, her arms and legs stopped moving.

Yoko screamed and threw the sword against the stones.

Crawling over to the edge of the seawall, she vomited into the churning waves. Then, her shoulders heaving with sobs, she jumped headlong into the water. It was the middle of February and the water was icy, but all she could think of was ridding herself of all the grime and gore.

Almost as if it were a cleansing ritual, she repeatedly scooped water up with her hands and tossed it over her head. When at last she stopped, she was trembling so hard that it was all she

could do to drag herself back onto the seawall. There she burst into tears again and wept aloud from fear and self-loathing. She cried until her voice was hoarse, and when she was finally so worn out she could no longer do even that, Keiki called to her.

"Are you are finished?" he asked.

"What?" She tried to lift her head to face him.

He stood watching her, his mask-like face as serene as ever. "This was not the last of our pursuers. Others will come soon."

"So?"

Yoko realized that some rational part of her was paralyzed. The word *pursuers* evoked no emotion, not even the slightest pang of fear. Nor did she fear defying him.

"There are many, and they are strong. The only way I might protect you is if you come with me now."

Yoko spat out, "I will not."

"You do not know what you say."

"I've had enough. I'm going home."

"Even if you did, you would not be safe," Keiki said.

"I don't care anymore. I'm cold, and I'm going home. Get this thing out of me."

The man stared at Yoko a long time, and she returned the look with a defiant glare. "It's in my body, isn't it? *Attached?* That creature, Joyu? Take it out."

"But you will have need of him a while."

"I most certainly will not, and you know why? Because I'm going home."

"Is there no end to your foolishness?" he roared suddenly.

Yoko's eyes opened wide. Apparently this stranger *could* lose his infuriating composure.

Keiki sighed, then spoke again more quietly. "It would inconvenience me greatly were you to die. If you refuse to come with me, I have no choice but to bring you by force."

"Who put you in charge anyway?!" shouted Yoko. She couldn't remember a time when she had ever shouted at anyone in anger. It made her feel powerful, euphoric. "What have I done to deserve this? I don't want to be involved and I'm not going anywhere with you. In fact, I am going home!" She glared at him, punctuating her insistence.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot heed your request," he said, holding out the sword, but she knocked it violently aside.

"I told you I'm going home. I don't take orders from you."

"How many times must I say this? You are in danger."

Yoko smiled thinly. "I've no problem with danger. And what concern is it of yours, anyway?"

"It *is* my concern," muttered the man quietly. Then he glanced over Yoko's shoulder and nodded quickly. Without warning, two white arms reached around from behind her.

"What?" Yoko turned her head to see the bird-woman who had first appeared on the rooftop. Swiftly, the woman grabbed Yoko's right arm and forced the sword into her hand. Then she grabbed the girl's other arm and pinned them both behind Yoko's back.

"Let me go!" Yoko shouted, struggling in vain.

"You are my master," Keiki whispered.

Yoko stared at Keiki. "What did you say?"

"Should you command me, I would do as you ask. However, your life is in danger, and so I must ask that you heed my bidding now. I must bring you to a place of safety and learn more about the movements of our enemies. Then, if you still wish it, I will take you home."

"Your master?" stammered Yoko, bewildered. "Since when have I been your anything?"

"You did say that you agreed," he said quietly.

Yoko fumed. "All this time you've been doing exactly as you please, yanking me around from here to there, letting things *attach* themselves to me . . . I've had it!"

"There is no time to explain these things now." Keiki's look chilled Yoko to the bone. "Truth be told, I too am less than pleased with this arrangement, but these matters are not for me to decide, and I cannot leave you to your own fate as much as I might wish to. We must also consider the innocents who could become involved and strive to keep them from harm. If you resist, I will do everything in my power to take you with me. Kaiko, bring her."

"No, let me go!"

Keiki did not look back. "Hankyo!"

The red-furred hound-beast emerged from his hiding place in answer to Keiki's call.

"Fly separately. The scent of blood will cling to you."

A moment later, the giant leopard-beast, Hyoki, appeared and knelt down before them. The woman mounted its back, carrying Yoko, who was still tightly pinned.

Keiki leapt lightly astride Hankyo.

"I'm not kidding!" Yoko shouted desperately. "You take me home now! Or at least take that thing out of me!"

"It cannot be a burden. You do not feel him attached, do you?"

"It . . . it just doesn't feel right. Take it out, now!"

The man turned toward Yoko and called out sternly. "Joyu! Conceal your form. Act as though you were not there."

There was no reply.

Keiki nodded, satisfied, and the beast upon which Kaiko and Yoko rode rose quickly to its feet. Yoko clung to the strange woman's arms as the beast rode soundlessly upward.

Yoko's startled cries trailed off as Hyoki charged effortlessly into the air. The beast climbed swiftly, its paws churning the air as though swimming. The ground dropped away rapidly, yet so smooth were the creature's movements that it hardly seemed as though they were moving at all. Like a forgotten dream, the land fell away beneath them—slipping farther and farther into the distance until Yoko could barely see the seaside town now faint, tiny, and glinting red in the twilight.

A full, starry sky hung above them. Yoko could not feel the wind blowing against them, so there was little sensation of speed, but as she watched the town lights swiftly fading behind her, she knew their speed was great indeed.

For a while after they took off, Yoko had screamed and pleaded, but neither the beast that carried her nor the woman

who held her responded even to her tears. She felt no fear of falling, but she was terrified to discover where they were going.

The beast continued flying, heading out across the open ocean. Keiki and the creature he rode were nowhere in sight—flying separately as he had commanded, no doubt.

When she finally gave up trying to get away, Yoko realized that it almost felt good to be riding on the back of the strange leopard-beast as it clawed with its four limbs through the air. The arms of the bird-woman were warm against her cold skin. After a long while, Yoko hesitantly turned to look at her.

"Are we being followed?" she asked, twisting around.

The woman nodded. "Many demons come." Her voice was surprisingly gentle. A small comfort, but it did much to calm Yoko's frayed nerves.

"Who are you?"

"We serve the *taiho*. Please now, face forward. If I drop you, I will be punished."

Yoko nodded and reluctantly faced forward as she was asked. All she could see before them were the black sea and sky and the faintly glimmering stars. The cold moon hanging high in the sky cast its reflection upon the surging waves far below.

"Hold on to your sword tightly," the woman advised. "Never let it leave your side."

Her words made Yoko afraid. Would she have to fight another nauseating battle? "More enemies?"

"They chase us, but Hyoki is faster. You need not worry."

"So why the sword?"

"It is wise to be ready always. Lose neither the sword nor the scabbard."

"The scabbard?"

"They are two, and they are one. The gem upon the scabbard's cord protects you," the woman said.

Yoko looked at the sword she held. The scabbard was adorned with a braided cord, at the end of which hung an azure jewel the size of a ping-pong ball. "This?"

"Yes. Take it in your hand if you are cold."

Yoko gripped the gem and felt warmth spreading from her palm.

"It is a balm for wounds, illness, and fatigue. The sword and the jewel are both sacred treasures. Do not lose them."

Yoko nodded. Then, as she considered her next question, the beast suddenly began to descend. The moon's white reflection floating on the black sea below them grew ever closer as their pace increased. It seemed to Yoko that the waves were rising to greet them; and indeed as they dropped farther she saw that the sea was churning unnaturally. A great pillar of water came boiling up from the center of the moon's reflection.

The beast seemed to head straight for the shining, roiling lunar circle. At the last moment, Yoko realized that they were not going to turn, and a new surge of terror filled her. "I can't swim!" she screamed. She clutched at the white arms that held her, and Kaiko tightened her grip.

"Worry not."

"Don't worry?!"

Water filled her eyes and she shut them tightly, bracing herself as they flew straight into the center of the moonlight. But she didn't even feel the cold spray from the swirling waves. Instead, she felt as though they were melting into the moon's reflection, and its pale light still shone through her eyelids. Then she felt something like a thin cloth being pulled tight over her skin, and when she opened her eyes, she found herself speeding down a tunnel of light.

There was no sound, no wind, only brightness. They were diving straight down through a shimmering tunnel and into the sea! Receding behind them Yoko saw the white image of the moon, wavy and shifting upon the black surface of the water. But when she looked ahead, she saw another circle of light just like the one behind them. For a moment she felt weightless, disoriented. Was it the moon she saw above her that was casting the circle of light below, or was the moon below casting the circle of light above? And which direction *was* above and which below? Either way, the tunnel was a short one; moments later Hyoki leapt forward, charging through the center of the circle of light, and again Yoko felt a sensation whisper over her body like cloth. Now they were definitely moving upward, over the sea again.

Sound came rushing back to Yoko's ears. Once again they were soaring above the moon's reflection, as if they had returned to the exact place where they had entered the water—and yet something was different. As they moved out over the dark sea, giant waves formed behind them, spreading in concentric circles from the bright center of the reflection as if the moonlight tunnel were the eye of a storm. The sea's surface





frothed and tossed up waves, while vast clouds overhead roiled in what must have been a fierce wind. The beast upon which Yoko rode was still surrounded by a peculiar calm, but even within that protection a gentle wind had begun to swirl.

Hyoki galloped through the air, gaining altitude. Soon the reflection of the moon on the rough sea was so far away that it no longer looked like a moon at all.

Kaiko's cry came sharp and sudden.

"Hyoki!"

The beast arched its head to look backward, and Yoko also turned to see the bird-woman peering back over her shoulder. Around the distant reflection on the black water, countless dark forms were swirling. When a cloud smudged out the only source of light—the moon itself, hanging high in the vaulted sky—true darkness fell, deep and vast.

Yoko strained to gaze into the gloom, fearing and yet wanting to see what followed them. There, in that darkness unbounded by heaven or earth, her eyes gradually made out a thin, red light where the moon's reflection had been, which wavered and jumped like a fire blazing. It changed shape and danced; and against its reddish glare she saw innumerable forms, the silhouettes of a great horde of bizarre beasts leaping and running from the light, toward her—apes, rats, and birds of red, black, and blue.

Yoko was in shock. It was a scene she knew all too well. "Run," she said, her voice rising from a harsh whisper. "Run!"

Kaiko rubbed her shoulder. "We are fleeing swiftly. You will be safe."

"No! No I won't! They're coming! Can't you see them?"

The woman pressed Yoko down to the beast's back. "Hang on to Hyoki. Hang on tight."

"Where are you going?"

"I will slow their pace as best I can. Hang on and never let go of your sword."

The bird-woman waited until she saw Yoko nod, and then she let go of the girl and sprang from the beast's back into the stormy sky. Kicking off like a swimming, golden-brown striped seabird, she sped away behind them and was soon swallowed by the darkness. Now Yoko and Hyoki sped through the dark air alone.

"Will we make it?" she said to the beast who carried her.

"Who can say?" Hyoki said calmly. For several minutes they raced along in silence. Yoko was just starting to think they might have a chance, when Hyoki's sudden shout erased any ease she was beginning to feel.

"*Go'yoo!*" cried Hyoki, kicking sideways in space as a burning red light appeared in their path. Something plummeted through the air where they had been a moment before, hurtling down with incredible speed.

"What is it? What's going on?"

Hyoki leapt to the left and right, dropping altitude fast.

"Raise the sword! It is an ambush. We are trapped!"

"What?" Yoko's attention was fixed on the menacing glow of the red light that hung before them. Something danced across it—many somethings. Another swarm of dark shapes rushed toward them.

"No! Run, Hyoki! Run!"

Whatever was to come, Yoko did not want to use the sword. A thrill of revulsion ran through her as she felt the cold stirring of Joyu's presence in her limbs. Her knees gripped Hyoki's sides so tightly that she heard his fur squeak. A tingle crawled down her spine and her torso lifted away from the beast's back until she sat upright and poised. Her arms moved quickly, preparing for battle. Thrusting the scabbard behind her back and through the belt of her skirt, she drew the sword.

"No, stop! I don't want this!"

Heedless of her wishes, her right arm readied the blade. Her left arm grabbed onto Hyoki's hair, twisting it firmly in her grip.

"Please, stop," Yoko whimpered.

The horde of foes was fast approaching, and Hyoki no longer attempted to flee. Instead he charged straight for them—darting and weaving among the monstrosities like a small thunderhead crashing through a large one. With a perfectly natural movement, Yoko's arm swung the blade out, cutting into a giant beast that moved to attack them.

"No!!!" Yoko snapped her eyelids shut. It seemed that her eyes and her voice were the only things over which she still had control. She had never killed a living thing before the kochou; she could hardly bring herself to cut up meat for dinner. She couldn't be made to kill something. She wouldn't!

"Do not close your eyes. Joyu cannot work!" warned Hyoki.

"No!"

Yoko was thrown backward and forward, left and right as Hyoki swerved; but still she kept her eyes tightly shut. She

didn't want to see the death. If she could stop it by closing her eyes, she would never open them again.

Hyoki twisted hard to the left. A moment later, Yoko felt a shock run through her body as if they had hit a wall. She heard a brief yelp and opened her eyes; but the darkness was so complete that she saw no more than she had when they were closed. She barely had time to think before Hyoki lurched abruptly and she lost the sensation of his hide between her legs. She did not scream. There was no time.

Yoko was cast into space. Before her eyes, a foul boar-like beast appeared. Her sword flashed out, and her arm felt the shock of the blade cutting through gristly hair, flesh, and bone. The beast's howls stabbed at her ears, mingling with the sound of her own scream. Then all of her senses plunged into darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

When she came to, Yoko lay by the water's edge, her ears filled with the sound of waves crashing upon the sand.

Yoko lifted her head. A particularly large wave came rolling in, sending the water creeping up the shore until it washed over her lower legs. Oddly enough for the time of year, the seawater didn't feel cold at all, so she stayed there on her side and let it flow over her.

The air smelled strongly of brine. It suddenly occurred to Yoko's drifting mind that seawater smelled a great deal like blood. She found herself listening closely to the sound of her own pulse surging like a tide in her ears. That was it! It was seawater that ran through her veins, not blood at all.

Another large wave rolled up the shore, and this time the water climbed halfway to Yoko's thighs. The sand in the swirling water tickled her knees, and the brine smell hung thick in the air.

Yoko gazed detachedly down at her feet and noticed a faint trace of red in the water as it drew away. Looking out to sea the only color she saw was a uniform gray that spanned the vast sea and sky. Another wave came in and when it rolled back she noted that the water again had a distinctly reddish tinge. Yoko searched for the source of that color, and gasped aloud.

It was coming from her leg. As the receding wave pulled away, the red streamed from her calf like wax from a melting candle. Flustered, she looked down at her body and saw that both her arms and her legs were dyed a deep crimson. Her uniform, too, was soaked red.

Yoko whimpered. *Blood . . .*

Her entire body was covered with splattered blood. Her hands were so red they looked black, and when she squeezed her fingers into fists they stuck together. The sensation sent a shiver down her spine and made her stomach churn. When she brushed at her head and hair she found that everywhere she touched was sticky. Yoko sat up as the waves began washing all around her. The water that came in was a cloudy gray, but as it receded it was painted scarlet. Frantically, she thrust her hands into the next wave's crest and scrubbed them together. The water that dripped from between her fingers was the color of blood.

With each wave that came, she scooped water in her hands and furiously rubbed them together, but no matter how much she washed she couldn't get her hands white again. The tide was coming in, and as she sat the water rose gradually until its surface was above her waist.

The blood spread out from her in all directions, slowly painting a blazing red eye on the vast expanse of gray.

With a start, Yoko noticed a change in her own fingers. She held them up before her eyes. From each fingertip extended a sharp, pointed nail as long as the length of her finger from first knuckle to fingertip.

What's this? She stared at her hands and noticed another change: countless cracks ran across her palms as if a knife had been drawn along each wrinkle.

The wind blew a tiny red flake off her hand and into the water. It was a piece of her skin, and where it had fallen from, Yoko could see a tuft of red hair exposed. She looked more closely and saw short red hair growing thick *under* the skin on her palm.

What . . . ?

She lightly rubbed at her hand, and a flurry of fragments fell off revealing more reddish hair. Every motion sent more flakes falling from her legs and arms, until red hair was bristling all over her.

Her uniform, tugged by the rough waves, was in tatters. From beneath that, too, she could see more of the red hair. As the water washed over her, red blood dyed it in a spreading pool of darkly gleaming crimson.

Nails long enough to be weapons. Thick red hair. It was as if she had been transformed into a monster.

"This can't be," she said quietly. Her own voice was even grating to her ears.

No. Why?

The sleeve of her uniform tore away, revealing an arm that bent strangely at the elbow. It looked like the forepaw of a dog or cat.

The blood . . . It must have been the blood!

The blood that had splashed over her from the creatures she had killed must have done this—it was changing her.

I'm becoming one of them.

She tried to scream, but no words reached her ears. All that she heard was the rough tumbling of the sea waves and the pitiful howl of a beast.

When Yoko opened her eyes, she found herself sprawled in a pale blue shadow. She took a hesitant breath, and her whole body ached. Pain shot through her chest. Quickly she held her hands up to her face, then gave a sigh of relief. No claws. No red hair.

For a moment she didn't know where she was or how she had gotten there—but then the memories came rushing back. She tried to stand, but her body was so stiff she could barely even move. Forcing herself to remain calm, she took several deep breaths, and then slowly rose. As she breathed, the pain gradually receded. She sat fully upright, sending a cascade of small pine needles down the front of her shirt.

Pine needles?

They were indeed pine needles. She looked around and discovered that she was sitting on a forest floor. Looking up, she saw the jagged edge of a broken tree limb hanging above her head. Newly exposed wood shone white in the darkness. She realized she had fallen from above, and the limb had broken beneath her.

Her right hand gripped the hilt of her sword tightly. She was surprised she had managed to hold onto it, and even more surprised that she seemed to have suffered no serious injuries. She had countless small cuts and scratches, but nothing so

grievous as to be called a wound. Best of all, she was completely normal—her body showed no sign of the horrific transformation that had gripped her in her dream.

Hesitantly, she reached behind her back. Finding the scabbard still thrust through her belt, she tugged it around to the front and sheathed the sword.

A thin, white mist was flowing slowly through the forest. It smelled as the air smells in the hour just before dawn. In the distance, she could hear the sound of waves.

So that's why I had that dream.

It made sense that the memory of splattering blood, the fight with the beasts, and the sound of the waves had crept into her sleep to give her the monstrous nightmare.

Yoko peered around and couldn't believe what she saw: the woods looked like a typical Japanese seaside pine forest, the trees small with twisted limbs.

It was just before dawn, and she was near the ocean—neither dead nor so badly wounded that she couldn't move. That was all she knew.

She didn't think anyone else was in the forest with her. If any enemies were looking for her, they sure weren't close by. Nor, for that matter, were any friends.

She figured she had been alone for several hours. Where was Keiki? He had said that if they ever got separated she should stay where she was and not move—not even an inch.

He must be looking for me, she thought.

After all, he had made such a show of saying he'd protect her, and now that he was no longer there ordering her around or

saying things that didn't make the least bit of sense, his absence began to weigh on her. Yoko leaned up against a nearby tree trunk and grasped the gem that still hung by its cord. The pains she felt throughout her body quickly receded. *How strange . . .*

She looked at the gem again, but it appeared to be nothing more than an ordinary rock. It had a cheap luster like glass, and it was a dullish blue. If there were such a thing as blue jade, it might look like this.

Again Yoko grasped the gem tightly. Then, sitting very still, she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

When she opened her eyes again, the trees and grass around her were lit by the diffuse glow of early morning.

They're late . . . if they're coming at all.

What could they be doing if not searching for her? How could they leave her alone for such a long time? Keiki, and Kaiko, and Hyoki . . .

Yoko hesitated a while, then quietly mouthed the name she had heard Keiki say: "Joyu?"

Surely, that thing must still be *attached* to her. She called out again, but there was no answer. She rubbed her arms, her legs, and the back of her neck, but she couldn't feel Joyu anywhere. There was no way of knowing whether it was there or not, since the only time it showed itself was when she was using her sword.

"Are you there? What happened to Keiki?" Yoko asked again, but there was no response.

Unease filled her. What if they wanted to find her, but couldn't? The screams she had heard just before falling came back to her vividly. Hyoki—she had left him in that swarm of creatures. Was he okay? Had he survived?

A pang of worry drove her to her feet; her stiff joints creaked as she stood up to look around. To her right was what appeared to be a clearing in the woods.

If I just walk over there, that won't be too dangerous.

Yoko walked toward the clearing until she came to the border of the forest. Beyond the last tree was a brown field dotted with low shrubs. Farther off beyond a cliff's edge was a vast, dark sea, which was odd because it looked black even in the daylight.

Drawn by an impulse she didn't understand, Yoko walked to the edge of the cliff. When she reached the place where the land fell away she saw that its height was considerable—at least as high as the roof of the big department store in her hometown. Crouching carefully, she swung her legs over the cliff edge and sat there a long while, bewildered, gazing out at the sea. The height didn't concern her, but the ocean that spread out below her feet was inexplicably odd. It was such a dark blue that it truly looked black. Yet as she pondered this, she gazed along the shoreline where the sheer cliff face met the water, and was surprised to discover that she could see the rock wall continuing far below the ocean's surface. The water wasn't black at all! On the contrary, it was incredibly clear.

Now she realized that she was not peering at a so-dark-blue-it-looked-black ocean, but rather she was looking straight through miles of incredibly clear water at something enormous

and black in its nethermost depths. Maybe it was the bottom—so deep that not even light could touch it.

And yet, down in those impossible depths, she thought she could see tiny lights sparkling. She stared uncertainly at the tiny glimmerings. They seemed almost like scattered grains of sand lit from within; in some places they clustered like colonies, faint and twinkling.

Like stars . . .

Yoko felt dizzy. She closed her eyes for a moment, and dug her fingers into two tufts of grass that grew on either side of where she sat. Then she looked again.

It was like she was gazing down at interstellar space. The constellations and galaxies she had seen in countless photographs were spread out below her feet.

No. I do not know this place.

The thought came unbidden to her mind. She realized she *had* known the stars were there ever since she first saw the strange, dark ocean—but she had been avoiding the idea, unwilling to accept the truth. Now, the realization filled her and she was lost.

This was not the world Yoko knew. She had never seen an ocean like this. Everything—the forest, the cliff, the dark waves—belonged to another world.

I don't believe it.

Yoko closed her eyes and shouted, "Joyu! Please, answer me!"

But all she could hear was the tide surging through her. The thing—it must still have been there—did not answer.

"Are you gone?! Somebody, help me!"

Where was she—what kind of place *was* this? Was she safe, or in danger? A whole day had passed since she had set out for school. Her mother had to be worried sick. And if she knew her father, he was roaring mad—yet even then she would have given anything to see him.

"I want to go home," she whispered, and the tears began to fall. "I want to go home."

Once she had begun to cry, she couldn't stop. She drew up her knees and buried her face against them. Then she wept aloud.

Yoko cried long and hard, until her eyes felt heavy and hot. At last, exhausted, she lifted her head again. If nothing else, all the crying had helped her calm down. Slowly she opened her eyes and looked out at the sea.

It really was like looking down at a night sky full of stars. Watching more carefully, she saw that the galaxies in the water were slowly revolving.

Strange . . . and beautiful.

Yoko breathed slowly. There were worse things than this, she thought. And so she sat there, staring, as an hour and more went by. Looking down upon the stars in the deep.

Yoko sat gazing at the sea until the sun had risen high in the sky. What world was this? Everything about this place was odd, especially the journey through the moon's reflection that

had brought her here. She had been taught, and she honestly believed, that the reflection of the moon wasn't something you could just walk through or hold in your hand. That would be like catching the sun.

And then there was Keiki and the strange beasts he commanded. There were no animals like that in Yoko's world. Surely he and all of those creatures, even the ones chasing them, had come from this world not her own. But what did it all mean?

Why did Keiki bring me here? What was he thinking?

He had said she was in danger, that he would protect her—but now where was he? And the bird-thing that had attacked them—what was it, and why was it so filled with the desire to destroy an ordinary girl like her? And why was everything just like her recurring dream?

The more she thought about it, the more she realized she understood nothing. Everything that had happened to her since she met Keiki remained a big question mark. She felt like the ratio of the known things in her life to the mysteries had gone topsy-turvy.

Yoko felt herself fill with a passionate resentment for Keiki. He had appeared without warning or explanation, only to drag her into this bizarre and fearful world. If she hadn't met him, she never would have come here, never would have had to kill any living thing—monster or no.

And yet it seemed that Keiki was the only thing she could hang onto in this strange place. So where was he? Had something happened? Did he want to come, but could not? Or was it something else?

Yoko sighed. Hard as it was to believe, it seemed that her troubles had only gotten deeper.

What did I do to deserve this?

Nothing. At least, nothing she could recall. It was all Keiki's fault. Even that creature that attacked her had probably done so only because of Keiki. That voice she had heard in the teacher's room, didn't it say they had been followed? Keiki had spoken of enemies, but how could they be Yoko's enemies? Yoko couldn't see any reason why any monster would consider her a threat.

She remembered Keiki's claim that Yoko was his master. Maybe that was at the root of the whole problem. If Yoko was Keiki's master, then of course Keiki's enemies would seek her out. So she had been forced to use the sword to defend herself from *his* enemies.

Yet she had no memory of ever becoming anyone's master—something she would certainly not have forgotten. Nor could she imagine any reason why she would *want* a servant or a subject. This must all be a misunderstanding on Keiki's part. Keiki said he had been searching for her. No doubt he had been searching for his real master and had simply made a very serious mistake. *What did you mean, you'd "protect" me? Where are you now?* Yoko spat quietly, "It's all your fault."

The shadows grew longer, and finally Yoko stood. Sitting here getting worked up was not helping her—she could see that much.

She gazed along the cliff in both directions, but nowhere could she see a break in its high, stony face. Turning her back

on the sea, she returned to the pine forest once again. She noticed that, although she had no coat, she didn't feel cold. The climate here was evidently much warmer than her town's.

The forest was small—little more than a grove. As she made her way through it, Yoko noticed many broken branches lying on the ground, as though a typhoon had passed through and left a trail of wreckage in its wake. She pushed past the debris and came to a wide, swampy clearing.

After studying the place for a moment, she realized it was not a swamp at all, but a series of cultivated fields that the storm had deposited a great deal of mud into. Here and there narrow field-paths wound their way through the morass. The long, thin green shoots of some crop poked up through the muck in places, but she could see that most had been blown flat in the mud.

The muck-sodden fields stretched on for quite a way, extending past a cluster of small houses—a village, apparently. Much farther beyond, she could see a steep mountain range, hazy in the distance.

Her eyes scanned the village. Nowhere could she see anything resembling a telephone pole or any other modern structure. There were no electrical lines, no antennas on any of the roofs. The roofs themselves were covered in black tiles, and the walls below were made of some kind of yellowed mud. Small trees had been planted in a tight hedge that surrounded the village like a wall, but she saw that most of them had fallen over.

All in all, it was nothing quite so exotic as she had expected. In fact the fields and forest looked much like those in the countryside near where she had grown up. She cast her eyes

over the cropland again and spotted several people standing at a distance from the woods. She couldn't make out their features, but as far as she could tell there was nothing monstrous about them. From the way they stooped and shuffled, they seemed to be doing work in the fields.

Yoko sighed with relief. The eerie sight of the star-filled sea had set her on edge, but here nothing seemed unusual at all. If she ignored the fact that these people apparently had no electricity, she could have been looking at a village anywhere in Japan.

Yoko took a deep breath and decided to call out to the field workers. Ordinarily she would have been too shy to talk to complete strangers—but this was hardly an ordinary day, and she didn't think she could make it on her own in a strange place like this.

She worried briefly whether they would understand her language, but that worry quickly faded when she considered her alternatives: She did not want to stay out in the woods alone.

To quell the fear inside her Yoko whispered the details of her plan, such as it was, over and over: "I'll explain to them what happened, and ask if they've seen Keiki."

That was all she could do.

After a bit of searching, she found a path that was walkable and began moving toward the people out in the field. As she approached them she realized that, while they were indeed human, they were certainly not Japanese.

One of the women had brown hair, and there was a man whose hair was fiery red. She noticed that they all looked a lot like Keiki.

Their faces and features didn't look particularly Western, but the strange-colored hair—which they all wore extremely long—made them seem quite out of place in the field. The clothes they were wearing were also peculiar: something like kimonos, but with a different cut that made them appear foreign. Other than that, there was nothing remarkable about the people. With shovel-like tools, they were busily breaking down the remaining paths between the fields.

One of the workers lifted his face. He saw Yoko and said something to the others around him. Then he shouted out something to her, and although she was still too far away to make out the words, it didn't sound as though it was a foreign language. There were eight or so people in all, and now they slowed in their work and watched Yoko as she approached. When she had gotten fairly close to them, Yoko paused and bowed. She had no idea what else to do. A man with black hair who must have been in his thirties stepped swiftly up onto the path she walked.

"Where have you come from?" he said—in Japanese, to Yoko's tremendous relief. A smile came to her lips. Maybe she wasn't in such a bad fix after all.

"The cliffs . . ." she began.

The other men and women quit working and stood quietly watching Yoko and the man who had first addressed her.

"The cliffs? Your homeland?"

Yoko almost replied, "Tokyo." Then she thought better of it and closed her mouth. For a moment, she was tempted to tell them everything that had happened. But then it occurred to her that even if she did, they probably wouldn't believe her.

While she considered what to say, the man questioned her again. "You are dressed strangely. You did not come from the sea, did you?"

Yoko nodded. It wasn't really the truth, but it was close enough.

The black-haired man's eyes opened wide. "I see, I see! This is a surprise." He smiled wryly, and Yoko became more confused than before. He stared at her a moment, a suspicious look in his eyes, and then his gaze fixed upon her right hip.

"That's quite a treasure you carry. How did you come by that?"

Yoko realized he was talking about the sword that still hung in its scabbard at her waist.

"It was a gift."

"From who?"

"A man. His name is Keiki."

The man came closer to Yoko. She took a step back.

"Seems a bit heavy for you. Give it to me. I'll hold it."

Yoko didn't like the look in the stranger's eyes. Something about his demeanor made her think he wasn't offering to hold the sword out of kindness. She clasped the sword and scabbard to her breast and shook her head.

"No, that's okay. Actually, I was wondering if you could tell me where I am?"

"Hairou. And you hardly need a weapon such as that to ask directions. Give it here."

Yoko took another step backward. "I was told not to let it leave my grasp."

"Give me the sword!" the man barked. Yoko flinched, but she didn't have the courage to refuse any longer, and so, reluctantly, she held the sword out to him. He snatched it away from her and turned it over in his hands, gazing at the workmanship. "It's well-crafted. The man who gave you this must have been rich."

While they spoke, the other men and women had reached the pathway and gathered around them. Now they talked among themselves, staring at Yoko with suspicious eyes.

"Who could she be? *Kaikyaku*?" whispered one.

"From the looks of it," said the black-haired man. "See this sword!" Smiling, he tried to draw the weapon, but its trip into the water had apparently rusted it, for the blade would not budge from its scabbard. The man grunted disappointedly. "As I thought, a decoration. It was too pretty to actually be used. No matter." Laughing, the man thrust the sword through the belt at his waist. Then, with a sudden step forward, he reached out and grabbed Yoko's arms. Heedless of her screams, he twisted her wrists around behind her back and held her.

"Hey! Stop that. You're hurting me!"

"Sorry, but I only do what I must. All kaikyaku are to be brought before the magistrate. That is the law," he said, still smiling. "Now, start walking—that way. Do not worry; we mean you no harm."

The man pushed Yoko in front of him, calling out to the others. "Someone help me, here. We'll take her in now."

Yoko's arms were throbbing where the fellow held her. What gave him the authority to manhandle her? She had no idea who this magistrate might be, but she had no interest in being "brought before" him.

I only want to be let alone—to escape! As soon as that thought formed in her mind, she felt a cold sensation shoot down her arms and legs. In a flash, her arms curled up, around, and behind her—easily twisting out of the man's grasp. Of its own accord, her hand lashed out and yanked both sword and scabbard from the man's belt. She leapt backward. "Hey!"

The man lunged forward, and someone shouted, "Watch out, the sword!"

"Eh? It's only an ornament. Come on, girl, you're going with me. No more tricks."

Yoko shook her head. "No."

"Shall I force you? Stop acting the fool and come here."

"I will not."

The man stepped forward. Yoko's hand reached down and pulled the sword out of the scabbard in one smooth motion.

"What?!"

"Please don't come any closer." Yoko stepped back. As they faced each other, more people appeared from their village houses. The original group of field workers stood frozen, staring at her as though she were a poisonous viper. She whirled around and began to run. Immediately, she heard the sound of running feet behind her.

"Stay away!" She glanced over her shoulder to see whether the black-haired man was chasing her. An instant later her body stopped short, and she pivoted into a wide fighting stance and raised her sword. She could practically hear the blood draining from her face. "No, stop!" she shouted at the air.

The sword swung violently toward the stranger, who was running straight for her.

"Stop, Joyu, no!" She couldn't let this happen. The tip of the blade cut a clean arc through the air. "I won't commit murder!" she shouted, and closed her eyes tight. The sword stopped abruptly in mid-swing.

A moment later she was knocked down hard onto her side. Someone straddled her and ripped the sword out of her hands. She began to weep, more from relief than from the pain.

"Fiendish girl!"

In the moments that followed, she was knocked about violently, but she felt no pain. Eventually she was dragged to her feet, and two strong hands twisted her arms behind her back once again.

Yoko had no will to resist. Her mind was filled with the terrifying possibility that Joyu might reveal itself again and cause her to do something for which she could never forgive herself.

Not here, she thought. *Not against these people.*

"Bring her and that demon-sword to the village. We'll take both to the magistrate."

Yoko, her eyes still tightly shut, had no idea who it was that spoke. And, she realized, she didn't care.

Two men pushed Yoko along, making her walk the thin path that wove through the fields. Proceeding in this way, they passed the village without pausing. Then, after about fifteen minutes of awkward travel, they arrived at a small town surrounded by a high wall. It was only a collection of a few buildings, like the ones in the smaller community by the field, but the wall that boxed it in must have been fifteen feet high.

They approached a side that was guarded by a large gate whose sturdy-looking doors were opened inward. Beyond, she could see a red wall with some sort of artwork drawn directly on its surface like a fresco. In front of the wall sat a lone, empty wooden chair.

Pushed along from behind, Yoko stumbled into town. Her captors directed her around the red wall, and on the other side she saw a road that went straight through the center of the small community.

The town seemed strangely familiar, and yet at the same time she knew she'd never seen any place like it ever before. Perhaps the familiarity came from the fact that the buildings looked faintly Western. The walls were white stucco topped with black tile roofs, and the trees were carefully pruned—their limbs propped up here and there with wooden poles. But the place was strangely alien in its utter lack of human life.

The wide road that led from the gate split off into two smaller roads halfway down its length. Yoko peered in both directions, but she could see no sign of people either way.

She noticed that the buildings were all one story high and were separated from the central roadway by long, white walls. These curtain walls were as high as the eaves of the buildings; both were split at regular intervals to allow access to the houses, and through the openings she could see small gardens and front doors.

All of the houses were roughly the same size, and though each was slightly different they all looked extremely similar. They also looked horribly inorganic.

Some houses had open windows with rolling blinds propped up by what looked like bamboo poles. Yet somehow this sign of domesticity made the place seem even more desolate. There was not so much as a dog barking in the streets, or any sound one might expect in a town this size.

The main road ended about three hundred feet from the gate at a wide courtyard before a large white house. The house's eaves and columns were painted with bright, cheery colors, which somehow seemed artificial to Yoko. She felt as if she were looking at the set for a play, not real life. Everything was so bright and real that it actually looked fake. The side streets ran for about ninety feet away from the main intersection before turning sharply at what Yoko thought was the outside wall of the town. No one was standing on the street corners.

Looking around, Yoko noticed that no house was particularly larger than any of the others. In fact, from where she stood near the intersection, she could stare along the edge of all the black-tiled roofs and see the outside wall on the far side of town. If she swept her gaze around three hundred sixty degrees, she

could see the complete shape of the outer wall: a long, narrow rectangle.

Now that they were inside, the strange community seemed so small and the streets so cramped that she felt claustrophobic. The entire town's total width was little more than half that of her school building back home. For such a small place, the outer wall seemed needlessly high. All of this combined to give Yoko the feeling that she was walking through a plastic model of a ghost town sitting at the bottom of a giant aquarium.

Yoko was brought into the building that framed the courtyard where the main street ended. Its construction made her remember a place she'd visited once in Chinatown. The pillars were painted bright red and the decorations were garish. It was all as fake as everything else she'd seen in the town.

Inside, a long thin corridor ran down the center of the building, dark and devoid of life. Yoko's captors paused briefly at the entryway, discussing something in lowered voices, and then led her down the corridor until they reached a small room. They shoved her inside and closed the door behind her. The nature of the room was immediately apparent: it was a cell.

Clay tiles lined the floor, many of them cracked or broken at the corners. The walls were made of hard-packed earth, run through with cracks. Near the top of the outside wall was a small window closed with an iron grate. The one door also had a small window, which was also barred; through it Yoko could see a man standing in the hallway outside.

Inside the cell was a small wooden chair, a wooden table, and a raised platform just long enough for Yoko to lie down on. Other

than that, the chamber was empty. A thick blanket had been laid atop the raised platform, which she assumed must be the bed.

Yoko was filled with questions. Where was she? What kind of a place was this? What was going to happen to her? She glanced at the man outside, but he didn't seem particularly friendly or willing to talk. Eventually, she sat down on the bed and silently hung her head. There was nothing else she could do.

A considerable amount of time went by before Yoko became aware that more people had entered the building. She heard footsteps approach her cell door, and the guard changed. Her new watchers were two men, both wearing blue leather armor that made Yoko think they were police or some sort of town guards. She held her breath and feared the worst, but the armored men merely glared at her in silence.

After a time, when her initial anxiety had passed, Yoko decided she was actually glad someone was there outside the cell. Her situation was far from ideal; but she felt that if she had been left entirely alone for hours on end, her unease would have gotten the better of her. She debated talking to the soldiers outside, but couldn't find the strength to raise her voice.

It seemed like an eternity passed while Yoko sat in the dim cell. Time dragged by so slowly she wanted to scream.

It was not until after the sun had set and the chamber was filled with murky darkness that three women came down the corridor and unlocked the door. The first to enter was an old

crone with white hair and a small lantern in one hand. Her clothes looked like some ancient Chinese garb Yoko had seen once in a movie.

It was a great relief to Yoko to see someone new, especially someone who wasn't a hard-faced man. She waited quietly, wondering what would happen now.

"Leave us," the old crone told the two other women who had accompanied her. They had each brought an armful of packages, which they set down carefully on the cell floor. Then they bowed deeply and departed. The crone watched them leave before she pulled the wooden table up to the side of the bed. She then placed her lantern atop the table, and a basin full of water beside it.

"Your face," she said, motioning toward the basin. "Wash."

Yoko merely nodded. Moving slowly, she rubbed water over her face, her hands, and her legs. Her hands had been dark with remnants of gore and grime, but after a little washing they were white once again.

Only now did Yoko realize how stiff she was. *It's because of Joyu*, she thought. Yoko's arms and legs had moved much faster and done much more than they had ever been trained to do, and now her muscles and joints were paying for it.

She washed herself as gently as she could, the cold water stinging her cuts and abrasions. Then she decided to comb her hair; she pulled out her braid and noticed something remarkable.

What's this?! Yoko stared at her hair, aghast.

It was red. Not the reddish-brown hair she had been so embarrassed about, but solid, brilliant red as though stained by

the blood of the creatures she had fought. The tips of her hairs, especially, were a fiery crimson. And that wasn't all: When she undid her braid, her hair fell over her shoulders in a wave.

The color was like nothing she'd ever seen. She had met people with red hair before, but nothing remotely close to this. This color couldn't exist in nature. It was too odd.

Yoko trembled. It looked far too much like the color of the fur she had seen in her dream that morning.

"Something the matter?" asked the crone.

Yoko blurted out everything she was thinking, and the crone listened carefully to each word.

"Strange? I see nothing strange. It's rare, yes, but a beautiful hue."

Yoko shook her head and dug her fingers into the pocket of her uniform. She pulled out a hand mirror. In it she could see the pure red of her hair, and there, beneath those wavy locks, she saw a total stranger.

For a moment Yoko didn't understand what it meant. She lifted her hand and hesitantly touched her face. The stranger in the mirror did the same, and only then did she understand that she was indeed looking at her own reflection.

This is not my face.

Even if she subtracted the difference the bright hair color made, this was definitely not her face. Whether it was attractive or ugly wasn't the point. It was just wrong. She stared, and deep green eyes set in tan skin stared back at her.

"This is not me," said Yoko, a little louder than she had intended.

The crone frowned. "What's that, now?"

"I said, this isn't me!"

The crone took the mirror from Yoko's trembling hands. Casually she lifted it up, peered into its depths, and then returned it to Yoko. "The mirror does not seem warped."

"But this isn't my face," Yoko repeated—and felt another shock as she realized that even her voice didn't seem quite the same as she'd remembered it.

What was going on? Had she become someone else entirely?

Not a monster, but still . . .

"Then perhaps it is you who have become warped," the old crone said with a hint of a smile.

Yoko glared at her and then gazed into the mirror again. It felt strange. There, where she should be, was someone else.

"Why?"

"If I had the answers I would give them to you gladly, but sadly, I do not." The old woman was still smiling. She took Yoko's hand and, with a cloth soaked in some aromatic liquid, began to daub at the wounds on her arm.

Peering more closely at the face in the mirror, Yoko fancied she could see a faint trace of the Yoko she knew, though it was so slight it might have been only her imagination.

She set the mirror down and resolved not to look at it again. She had never been particularly fond of her own face, but she

did not feel she had the courage to meet that strange girl's stare. Not yet. She told herself that it didn't matter what her face looked like, and she decided she could live with the bright red hair if she just pretended that it had been dyed.

"Well, I'm sure this sort of thing happens," the crone remarked uselessly. "You'll get used to it, in time." She took the basin off the table and set a large bowl in its place. The bowl was full of soup with something like rice dumplings floating in it.

"Eat. If this does not fill you, there is more."

Yoko shook her head. She couldn't imagine eating.

"You are not hungry?"

"I don't want it."

"Try it and you may find you are hungrier than you realize."

Yoko shook her head and said nothing. The crone gave a soft sigh and poured tea from a tall pitcher with a long spout. Then she pulled her chair closer to the girl.

"So, you come from Over There?"

Yoko looked up. "Over There?"

"Beyond the sea. From across the *Kyokai?*"

"The Kyokai?"

"The sea below the cliff. The dark, empty ocean."

So it's called the Kyokai, thought Yoko, storing the sound of the word away in her head for later reference.

The crone produced a sheet of paper and spread it out on the table. Then she set down a box with an ink stone on it. Picking up a brush she held it out to Yoko.

"Your name?"

Although taken aback, Yoko took the brush and wrote her name:

中嶋陽子

"Yoko Nakajima—that is a Japanese name."

Japan? She knows Japan?

"Am I in . . . China?" Yoko asked. The crone shook her head.

"You are in Kou. Officially the Kingdom of Kou, I suppose."

As she spoke, the old woman took up another brush and began to write first with the character for *Kou* at the top:

巧

"Now," the crone continued, "here we are in the town of Hairou:

配浪

in the prefecture of Shin:

槙

which is in the territory of Rokoh, which lies in the Fuyo Region, in the province of Jhun. And I am an elder of Hairou," she finished, scribbling a long series of characters before she set down the brush at last.

Yoko's mind reeled at the sheer volume of names and subdivisions. However, though the lines of the characters the woman drew took an odd turn here and there, Yoko recognized them instantly as Chinese characters.

"You use Chin—um, characters here?"

"We use letters as we see fit. How old are you?"

"Sixteen. So wait, are there characters for that word . . . *Kyokai?*"

"That is written with the characters for *void* and *sea*," the woman said, drawing the characters on the paper:

虚海

The Void Sea . . . Now that she thought about it, it was a very appropriate name for that black expanse of water.

"What do you do?"

"I'm a student," answered Yoko, and the crone smiled.

"Well it seems that you can speak, and you can read our writing. Have you brought anything other than that strange sword?"

The girl reached into her pocket and took a survey of her belongings: one handkerchief; one hairpin, slightly bent; the hand mirror; one small notebook; one wristwatch, broken . . . and that was all.

Yoko laid out her meager belongings on the tabletop. The crone gazed down on them, shaking her head, and then with a sigh she took the objects and tucked them inside the fold of her kimono.

"What is going to happen to me?"

"Well now. That is for people greater than me to decide."

"Have I done something bad?" Yoko felt like she was being treated like a criminal.

The crone shook her head. "No, you have done nothing wrong. Only, we are obligated to bring kaikyaku to the magistrate. Please understand."

"Kaikyaku?"

"Visitors from the sea. It's written with the characters for *sea* and *guest*."

The crone paused to add the characters to the already crowded sheet of paper:

海客

"This is what we call those who come over the Void Sea. It is said that in the far east, there is a land called Japan. No one I know has seen it, but the kaikyaku come so it must be there." She looked intently at Yoko. "People from this Japan are occasionally caught up in a *shoku* and carried here, like you. These are the kaikyaku."

"A *shoku*?"

"Yes. Written with the character for *to eat:*

食

But you add the character for *insect* to the side, like so—" She drew the new character on the paper:

蝕

"It is like a storm, yet unlike a storm. Suddenly it begins, and suddenly it ends. And then the kaikyaku come." The old woman smiled a troubled smile. "Most are corpses. But living or dead, we are to deliver them. Our leaders decide what is to be done."

"And what is that?"

"To tell the truth, I do not know. My grandmother was a young girl when the last living kaikyaku came. They say that one died before reaching the magistrate's office. You reached the shore without drowning. You were lucky."

"Um . . ." Yoko began, "what is this place?"

"The province of Jhun, as I have said." The woman pointed to the name of their land she had written moments before.

"That's not what I meant!" Yoko exclaimed, her voice rising with exasperation. "Look, I've never heard of any Void Sea! Or any kingdom named Kou, for that matter. I don't know this world. Where am I?!"

The crone sighed but did not answer.

"I want to know how to go home."

"You cannot."

Yoko clenched her fists, not wanting to believe what she had just heard. "What?"

"No one may cross the Void Sea. People may come, but they cannot leave. None who have tried have ever returned."

It took a while for the words to sink in. "I can't go home? That's ridiculous."

"I am sorry, but it's true."

"But, I . . ." A single tear rolled down Yoko's cheek. "I have parents. I-I have to go to school. I was out all last night, and I didn't tell anyone I wouldn't be coming in today. I'm sure they're all very worried."

The old crone looked away, then stood and began arranging the things on the table. "You will have to learn to let it go."

"But I didn't want to come here!"

"No kaikyaku does, I would think. Especially not the dead ones."

Yoko wasn't listening. "I left everything. I brought nothing with me. And I can't go home?! I . . ." She blubbered on until she ran out of words and began to sob loudly. Ignoring her, the crone turned away and left the room. The other women came to get the things that they had brought, and when the door shut

behind them Yoko heard the key turn in the lock. She was alone in the cell again. *They've even taken the lantern*, she thought. She had been left in utter darkness.

"I want to go home." Too weak and sore to stand, Yoko curled up in a ball on the bed. For a time she wept aloud; then, exhausted from crying, she fell asleep.

Her sleep was deep and without dreams.

"Get up."

Yoko awoke to a dull pain in her shoulder. Someone was prodding her roughly.

Her eyelids were heavy from crying, and when she finally lifted them, the light stung her eyes. She was weak from fatigue, although she still didn't feel the slightest bit hungry.

A man had come into the cell to wake her. He loosely tied Yoko's hands with a coarse rope. Then he pushed her into the corridor and made her walk ahead of him all the way to the courtyard, where a vehicle was waiting for her.

It was an open cart drawn by two horses. She was led to the rear of it and forced inside. Only when she was seated did she finally look up and notice all the people standing around on every corner of the courtyard looking at her. Had all these people been hiding in the town she had seen the day before?

She surveyed the crowd: Their features looked mostly Asiatic, yet the color of their hair was wrong. Instead of black there were browns, reds, and yellows—all seemingly unnatural and

garish. With so many in one place, the effect was bizarre. Every face, without exception, wore an expression of mixed curiosity and hatred. She felt like a criminal being sent to the gallows.

Opening her eyes in the morning gloom of her cell, she had tried to convince herself that her misfortunes of the past two days had all been a long and awful dream—one that was still going on. But the reality of the violent hands that had grabbed her and pushed her out in front of this hostile crowd swiftly shattered that illusion. She hadn't even been given time to dress properly or wash her face. Her uniform still stank of the sea.

A man climbed into the cart and sat next to Yoko. The driver lashed the horses. In a daze, Yoko watched the town rush by her. All she could think about was taking a bath. She wanted to sink herself into deep, hot water and scrub every inch of her body with sweet-smelling soap. Then she would change into new underwear and pajamas and sleep on her own bed.

When she woke, she would eat a breakfast that her mother had made and go to school. She would greet her friends and talk about nothing in particular. Come to think of it, she still hadn't done half of her chemistry homework . . . and she still had books checked out from the library. Last night was the final episode in a miniseries she had been watching. She hoped her mother had thought to record it for her.

"*Let it go,*" the old crone had said.

She couldn't believe it. Keiki hadn't said anything about not being able to go home. She couldn't be stuck here like this—not forever! Dragged off to who-knows-where without time to change or wash her face, tied up like a criminal and made to ride

in a dirty cart. Yoko was certainly no saint, but she was sure she had done nothing to deserve *this* abuse.

Watching the gates pass over her head, Yoko brushed a cheek against her shoulder to wipe away the tears she couldn't reach with her bound hands. The man next to her sat with a satchel in his lap, gazing, expressionless, at the passing scenery.

"Excuse me, where we going?" Yoko asked hesitantly.

He shot her a suspicious glare. "You can talk?"

"Of course. Where are you taking me?"

"The magistrate's office. You'll see the magistrate."

"What will happen to me then? Am I to be put on trial?" Yoko couldn't shake the feeling that she was being treated like some kind of criminal.

"You will be kept there until it is clear whether you are a good kaikyaku or a bad kaikyaku," said the man as though this was the most obvious thing in the world.

Yoko shook her head. "Good kaikyaku? Bad kaikyaku?"

"Yes. If you are a good one, then those who must see you will come, and you will be sent to live in an appropriate place. If you are bad, you will be exiled or put to death."

Yoko flinched. A cold tingle ran down her spine. "Put to death?"

"Bad kaikyaku destroy the state. If you are an ill omen, your head is forfeit."

"An ill omen?"

The man rolled his eyes at her persistent questioning. "Yes! Often kaikyaku bring war or pestilence. When this is the case, they must be killed quickly or the kingdom may perish."

"How do you know whether one is good or bad?"

The man smiled a thin tight-lipped smile. "Once you have been kept here for a while, we will know. If bad things start to happen, it will be evident that your coming was an ill omen. Of course"—the man shot Yoko a fearful glance—"I'm afraid it's pretty certain you're one of the bad ones."

"What? Why do you say that?"

"The shoku that brought you . . . how many fields do you think it turned to fallow mud? Hairou's harvest is in ruins."

Yoko closed her eyes. Now it made sense. That was why she was being treated like a pariah. To these villagers, she bore the taint of disaster and the promise of more disasters to come.

Yoko was suddenly very frightened. She didn't want to die, and the thought of being executed was worse than any ordinary death. If she died here, in this strange land, who would weep for her? Somehow she doubted anyone would bother sending her body back home.

How could this happen to me?

Yoko couldn't believe the turn her life had taken. *Is this fate?* Just the other day—how vividly she remembered it now—she had left home exactly as she always did. At school, the day had begun like any other. It should have ended like any other. Where had she gone wrong?

She thought back over her choices since the strange adventure began. Maybe she shouldn't have called to the farmers. Maybe she should have stayed by the ocean, sitting on that cliff. She should have waited for the ones who had brought her here. Or, maybe she had been wrong to come with them in the first place.

Really, though, she had never been given a choice. Hadn't Keiki told her he would drag her along no matter what? And with those monsters chasing her, Yoko had been forced to do something.

It was as though she'd stepped into some kind of trap. When she woke up on that apparently ordinary morning, she was already caught, and every passing minute had shut the jaws of the trap more tightly. By the time she had realized something was wrong, it was already too late.

I have to escape.

It was all Yoko could do to keep from panicking. If she was going to get out of this mess, she would probably have only one chance, and she couldn't afford to waste it. She had no idea what kind of punishment she would face if these strange, grim people caught her trying to get away. She would wait for the right moment; that was the way.

Yoko began to study her surroundings intently; her head turned back and forth at a furious pace. She felt like she was using her brain more than she ever had in her entire life.

"How long until we reach the magistrate?" she asked after a while.

"A half day by cart, I'd say."

Yoko looked up. The sky was the kind of clear blue that comes only after a typhoon has passed, and the sun was already high. She had to find a way to escape before sunset. She didn't know what kind of place the magistrate's office would be, but she was certain that once they reached it, her chances for escape would be less than they were on this cart.

"What will happen to my belongings?"

The man looked at Yoko suspiciously. "All the kaikyaku's belongings are to be brought to the magistrate."

"The sword, too?"

The man looked even more suspicious. "And why would you ask that?"

Careful, Yoko . . .

"It's very important to me." She clenched her hands behind her back in frustration. "The man who first captured me—he seemed to really want it. I was afraid he might steal it."

The guard snorted. "Nonsense. It will be delivered."

"Oh? It's only an ornament, but it's quite valuable."

The man looked at Yoko's face and then down at the cloth bag on his knee. She saw a glimmer of light within the bag; then the man reached in slowly and pulled out the jeweled sword.

"An ornament, you say?"

"Yes."

A wave of relief washed over Yoko to see the blade so nearby, even though she had no way of reaching it with her hands tied as they were. The guard clutched the sword by the hilt.

Please don't be able to draw it.

The man in the field had been unable to draw the weapon. Keiki had said that only Yoko could use it, which she understood to mean that only she could draw the sword. But now that her life might actually depend on it, she wasn't so sure.

The guard's arm tensed. The sword didn't budge.

"Huh." The man grunted in displeasure. "Thought it was real."

"Give it back to me," Yoko demanded.

"Have to bring it to the magistrate," the man replied with a wry smile. "And if you're going to lose your head anyway, you won't need it. For now, you'll just have to learn to live without it."

Yoko bit her lip. If only she weren't tied, she could have grabbed the weapon. She thought for a moment that Joyu might help, but when she strained at the ropes they felt tight and sturdy. Though the thing inside her gave her incredible skill, her strength remained that of a teenage girl in the end.

Surreptitiously, she began to search for some means to cut the bindings on her wrists. Then, unexpectedly, she became aware of a golden glimmer amid the passing scenery.

The cart had just begun to ascend a mountain road. There, in the middle of a dark wood of evenly planted trees, Yoko caught sight of a familiar shade of gold and opened her eyes wide. At the same moment, she felt the cold chill of Joyu surge under her skin.

Someone was standing in the forest at a distance from the road: a man with a white face and long golden hair, wearing a long-sleeved kimono-like robe.

Keiki.

At the same time that the word formed in her mind, she heard another voice within her that was not her own.

Taiho.

"Stop!" Yoko leaned over the edge of the cart and shouted. "Keiki! I'm here!"

With a callused hand, the guard grabbed her by the shoulder and roughly shoved her back down on the seat. "Down, you!"

Yoko jerked around to face him. "Stop this cart! I saw someone I know."

"You know no one here, girl," the man snarled.

"I do! I saw him. It was Keiki! Please, stop!"

The horse's pace slowed, but when she turned to look, the glimmer of gold was already far-off. Still she could see that he was there and right next to him stood someone else: a figure wearing a black hood over his head like some god of death. Behind them trailed several beasts.

"Keiki!" Yoko shouted, leaning once more over the edge. The guard pulled her back even more roughly than before. She lost her balance and sprawled sideways on the seat, and when she again lifted her head to look behind, the golden-haired figure was gone. She could still see the place were he had been standing, but there was no one there.

"Keiki?!"

"Silence, girl!" The man violently dragged Yoko back down into her seat. "There is no one! Do not try to trick me, girl. I am no fool."

"He was there!"

"Enough!"

Yoko cringed at the man's loud voice. She gazed back along the roadway, hoping with all her heart that what she had seen was not merely some trick of the eye; but she saw nothing. No one was there.

Why?

That voice she had heard when she thought she saw Keiki—that must have been Joyu. And that meant it *was* Keiki she had seen. Keiki and his beasts. He *had* survived.

Then why didn't he rescue me?

Desperately she was searching on all sides, hoping to catch another glimpse of that telltale golden light, when she heard a new voice burst from the woods in the direction that she happened to be looking. This time, the guard beside her looked too.

It was a baby crying. Someone's child was in the woods crying at the top of its lungs.

The guard pointed out into the forest. "What's that noise?" he shouted to the driver of the cart, who had not said a word since they left town. The driver glanced back at his two passengers and drew back on the reins. The horses stopped.

"Why, that's a child!" the guard exclaimed, rising.

"Pay it no mind," the driver told him gruffly. "You hear a babe a' crying in these woods, you'd best keep your distance."

"Yes, b-but—" the guard stammered, confused.

The child cried out with renewed vigor. It was an insistent, urgent cry, as though the infant meant to persuade those who listened not to leave it behind. The guard leaned out of the cart to search for the source of the voice, and the driver scolded him loudly.

"Ignore it, I say! I've heard stories of man-eating demons in the woods that cry like a child."

Yoko's spine tensed at the word *demon*.

Seeming unsatisfied by this explanation, the guard looked at the driver and then back into the forest. With a hard expression on his face, the cart driver lashed the horses into motion. Lurching wildly, the cart raced up the sloping forest road, careening through the shadows of the trees on either side.

For a moment, Yoko thought the cries were part of some sort of trick Keiki was using to save her; she would have shouted for joy if the writhing of Joyu within her were not so fierce. Her whole body tensed, ready for action.

She heard the baby crying again, this time quite nearby.

It's getting closer!

Then, in answer to the cry, she heard another shriek from a different direction—and then another—until there were cries echoing on all sides of the speeding cart.

"Yah!" The guard shouted in fear, his body tensed, his eyes nervously darting back and forth through the woods. Though the cart was racing along, the voices drew ever closer. These were not children. They couldn't be. Yoko's body twisted. Her pulse was racing. Something was welling inside her—not Joyu, but a surging energy that filled her ears with a noise like the rushing tide.

"Take off these ropes!"

The guard stared wide-eyed at Yoko and shook his head.

"Do you have a way to protect us if we are attacked?"

He shook his head again, bewildered.

"Then take off my ropes! Give me the sword!"

She could here the cries from nearby on every side. The circle was tightening. The horse raced, and the cart lurched

so hard that she feared they would all be tossed into the forest.

"Quickly!" Yoko screamed. An instant later she saw the man crumple onto his side as though something had hit him, and she felt a great shock lift her into the air.

For what seemed like eternity, Yoko tumbled weightlessly through the shadows; then she hit the ground with horrible force. As her head gradually cleared, she realized that the cart had flipped onto its side.

The guard was lying not far from her. Now he stood, shaking his head as though dazed. His hands still clutched the cloth satchel tight. The eerie cry that resembled a baby's wail sounded in the woods directly beside them.

"Please, unbind me!" Yoko pleaded. She heard one of the horses shriek in pain, and glancing toward the animal she saw that a thing like a large dog had leapt onto its back. The creature was covered in black hair, and when it opened its jaws its face seemed to split in two. The creature's snout was white, yet as Yoko watched, it was stained red with blood. The guard, still standing motionless, screamed in terror.

"There isn't any time! Take off my ropes and give me the sword!"

The man seemed unable to hear Yoko's voice. His face twisted in panic, and he turned and ran like the wind down the sloping track, still clutching the bag in his hand.

Immediately, several of the snarling black beasts sprang out of the woods in close pursuit. In moments, they had leapt up and caught him in their snapping jaws. And when their paws

touched down on the ground, Yoko saw the man standing hunched in their midst.

No, she thought, *not hunched. Shortened.*

Empty space was where his head should have been and one of his arms was also gone. His body hung there for a moment, then fell to the ground, spraying fountains of blood that painted the earth red. Yoko heard the other horse shrieking behind her.

Unsure of what to do, the girl cowered against the overturned cart. Something touched her shoulder, and she whirled around to see that it was the cart driver. He reached around behind Yoko's back and grabbed her hands. She could see he held a long knife.

"Run, girl," the man growled. "They're distracted; you can slip away." He stood, and Yoko felt that the bonds around her hands had been loosened.

The driver pulled Yoko to her feet and pushed her down the path in the direction the first man had gone, back the way they had come. Farther up the hill, she saw a group of monstrous hounds clustered like flies on one of the fallen horses. Down the path, a short distance from the second pack on the dead guard's body, she could see the man's head lying on the ground.

Even as Yoko blanched at the gore, she felt her body preparing for battle. She stooped and began picking up stones.

What can I possibly do with these?

In seconds, she had managed to gather a handful of small rocks. Disgusting crunching noises emerged from the mass of hairy shapes below, reaching her ears in time with the twitching

of the corpse's legs. Yoko's eyes counted the number of pelts: one, two . . . five, six dog-things in all.

Walking swiftly, Yoko approached the pack. A part of her noticed that the infant-like cries had ceased and been replaced entirely by sounds of snapping bone and ripping flesh.

As she drew closer, one of the dog-creatures lifted its face to look at her—its white nose dripping blood. Then, as if there was some unspoken signal, the other hounds raised their heads in unison.

What do I do now?

Yoko felt herself begin to run. The first dog that leapt at her caught a small rock right on the nose—not enough to stop it, of course, but enough to slow the beast's onslaught for a brief moment. With an angry snarl, the creature turned aside.

I cannot win this fight.

The pack dispersed, revealing a small pile of remains barely identifiable as human.

I will die here.

One bite from any of those hideous jaws could turn her into a quivering lump of meat in seconds, a gruesome meal to be summarily devoured. The monsters would eat her just like they had the guardsman. Yet even as her heart sank with despair, Yoko continued running, knocking the dogs aside with perfectly aimed stones. She would not stop Joyu this time. She relaxed, so as not to get in its way, and hoped that the end would be brief. Painless.

At some point, Yoko felt a sharp impact, followed by a hot trail of pain running down her back. Looking around





desperately for some chance of help, she saw the cart driver running in the opposite direction, swinging his blade at the bushes as he plunged into the forest at the road's edge. He had just cut his way into the underbrush when something grabbed him and pulled him out of sight behind a tree.

Yoko wondered why he had gone that way—and then she realized that he had used her as a decoy. He had thought about running toward the woods while the dogs were busy killing her, but his plan had failed. Yoko swallowed. She would be next.

Three paces from the mangled guard, she ran out of stones. A pointed snout lunged at her from the right. She caught it with her bare hand and pushed it away. At the same time, she felt something grabbing at her neck, and she pitched forward to avoid it. Seconds later, something heavy struck her just below the shoulder blades, and she fell into the remnants of the corpse headfirst.

She couldn't scream. The part of her that should have been disgusted was numb. Instead, she leapt up and whirled around. She didn't think glaring at the dogs would accomplish anything, so she was surprised when they ceased their charge and warily lowered their heads. She quickly realized that they were merely looking for an opening. *They won't wait long*. Still, if nothing else, the rocks had shown them that she wasn't harmless.

Yoko crouched and thrust her right hand beneath the mutilated corpse beside her. The man's death flashed before her eyes. What was she doing here? She didn't have time. The pack would make its move, and the battle would be over in an instant.

Her questing fingertips touched something hard.

The sword!

She felt the hilt in her hand then, as though the sword had sensed her reach and leapt into her grasp. Feeling like a drowning woman grabbing a lifeline, she tried to pull the sword and scabbard out from under the corpse, but for some reason the scabbard got caught halfway and wouldn't come any farther. She had been told that she shouldn't part the sword from its scabbard, but this was hardly the time to worry about advice from absent strangers.

After a moment's hesitation, Yoko yanked out the blade. Then, finding the cord that held the gem onto the scabbard, she cut it with the tip of the sword and clutched the gem in her hand. Her eyes flicked upward just in time to see the first dog leap.

Before she was even sure of what she was seeing, her right hand moved and the blade flashed. Yoko's mouth opened in a wordless scream.

Swinging the blade on either side, she cut down two of the beasts, then ran forward through the gap she had created. Pausing only to strike down the dogs that pursued her closely, Yoko ran for her life.

Yoko leaned her back against a thick tree trunk and slid down until she was sitting. She had kept on running downhill into the mountain forest until her feet stopped, here.

When she lifted her arm to wipe away the sweat that was running into her eyes, she noticed the sleeve of her uniform was heavy. It was drenched with blood.

Grimacing, she took off her top, leaving only her thin T-shirt between her skin and the cool forest air. With a clean corner of the gore-soaked garment, she wiped the blade of the sword. Then, she held the sharp edge up before her eyes.

Yoko remembered learning in history class that there was a limit to how many people you could cut down with a single sword. Apparently, chips from bones and oil from blood could, after a while, render a blade useless. She thought her own blade must be quite damaged by now, but after one wipe with her makeshift cloth she saw not a blemish on it.

"Strange . . ."

It was an odd weapon, and not just because only Yoko could draw it—a distinction which was meaningless without the scabbard, anyhow. When she first picked it up, she had thought the sword quite heavy, but now without the scabbard, the long metal blade was surprisingly light in her hands.

Yoko wrapped the newly shining sword in her discarded clothes. Tucking the bundle under her arm, she let herself breathe deeply until her tired lungs had completely recovered.

The scabbard was lying somewhere, assuming the demon-dogs had not dragged it off with the corpse.

Should I go get it?

She had been told not to let the sword and scabbard part; but did that mean that the scabbard was important for some reason, or was it just the gem that hung from it?

Yoko had stopped sweating and felt the chill of the forest even more, but she refused to put her soiled top back on. Now that she was somewhat calm, she realized that her whole body ached and was covered with scratches.

There were red tracks in her T-shirt where fangs had scraped through the fabric, and her skirt was ripped in several places, revealing a crisscross of cuts on her legs. Some of the cuts were still bleeding—but compared to what had happened to the fleeing guardsman, she found her own wounds surprisingly light.

How very strange. She couldn't imagine how she could have escaped with so little harm. She thought back to the time in the teachers' room when the glass had shattered and people were wounded, but she walked away unscathed. And then there was the time when she had fallen off the back of the beast that brought her to this world—she had escaped with mere scratches even though she had surely fallen a great distance.

It was all very peculiar, though perhaps not as inexplicable as the fact that when she looked in the mirror she saw a total stranger.

Yoko sighed. She felt the nervous tension of her flight slowly drain from her body. As she gradually relaxed, she noticed that her left hand was still clenched tightly into a fist. She opened her taut fingers, and the blue gem rolled out onto the forest floor. Quickly grabbing it, she felt the pain in her body begin to recede. Yoko held the gem for a while, until she noticed that all her wounds had ceased to bleed.

"Strange . . ." She decided that it was probably because of the gem's powers that she had been told not to lose the scabbard.

The pain and fatigue that had been gnawing away at her was gone. No matter whatever else might happen, she must not lose this gem. It was her greatest ally—in fact, right now it was her only ally.

She unfastened the scarf from her uniform and used the sword to cut it into strips. Tightly winding one of the strips, she passed it through the hole in the gem where the original cord had gone, then adjusted the length until it was the perfect size to hang around her neck.

She put it on and looked around. She was still on the sloping hill, and the forest around her was thick. The sun was beginning to slant toward the horizon. Its rays stabbed at the dusk of evening floating beneath the branches. Yoko was pretty sure the cart had been heading up the hill when she and her captors were attacked, but other than that she didn't know which direction was which.

Not that it matters. I've got nowhere to go.

"Joyu?" she asked hesitantly, focusing her thoughts on the back of her neck, but there was no response. "Please, say something."

No answer.

"What should I do? Where should I go?"

She heard nothing. It had to be attached to her still, but even when she tried as hard as she could, she couldn't feel it anywhere. The faint shuffling of the leaves around her feet made the forest seem all the more quiet.

"I'm so lost I don't know my right from my left," Yoko muttered aloud to herself. "If I go to a place where there are people, they'll

just try to capture me again. If they capture me, they'll kill me. Probably. But I can't just live on the run, avoiding people forever. Oh, if only there were a door somewhere that I could just open and go home, but I don't think it's that simple, is it?"

She knew she had to do something, and it wasn't continuing to talk to herself, that was for sure. And sitting here wasn't doing anyone any good, but where else could she go?

Twilight came quickly to the forest. She had no way to make a fire, nor any place to sleep. She had no food, no drink. She couldn't go to a town or village—it was too dangerous—yet the thought of staying out here, wandering around alone in the dark, left her terrified.

"Tell me, what do I do? You can tell me that at least!"

No answer, of course.

"What's going on, anyway? What happened to Keiki and the rest of them? That was him back there, wasn't it? Why did he hide? Why didn't he help me? Why?!"

But all she heard was the rustling of leaves.

"Please, I beg you, say something!"

A tear fell down her cheek. "I want to go home."

She couldn't say that she *loved* home—but being torn away from it, told she could never go back—now that was too much. Yoko felt a wave of homesickness wash over her. She felt as if she would do anything for a chance to go home—and, once she did get home, she would never leave again.

"I want . . . I want to go home." She sniffled and then began to sob like a child. A part of her realized that feeling sorry for herself was foolish. After all, she *had* escaped all the danger

the day had thrown her; she wasn't going to face an execution, nor had she been eaten by those hellhound horrors. But she sat down, alive, hugging her knees and crying.

She wondered if freedom really was such a great thing.

It would have been so quick . . .

A half-formed thought came suddenly to her mind, and she forcibly drove it out. It was too scary to think about. She hugged herself even more tightly, curling into a ball.

That was when she heard the voice.

It was a strange, high-pitched voice, like that of an old man, and it spoke the thought that Yoko had just driven from her mind.

"The pain would have been quick, and it would all be over now, hrmm?"

Flustered, Yoko looked around, her right hand already clutching the hilt of her sword. The forest around her had become a solid sheet of night. Even when she strained her eyes, she could barely make out the nearest tree trunks or the wall of underbrush between them.

Then she saw a dim light, not more than ten feet away from where she sat. Something was peering out from the bushes—something that was glowing faintly blue.

Yoko saw what it was and gasped.

It was a monkey with hair that shone like swamp fire. It stuck its neck out from between two bushes and bared its fangs at her in in a derisive sort of smile.

The creature laughed a sharp, shrill sound that grated in her ears. Then, much to her amazement, it spoke. "If you'd just let them eat you, it would all be over, hrmm?"

Yoko drew the sword out from its bundle. "What . . . what are you?"

The monkey cackled even louder. "What are we, you ask? I am me, you see? Foolish girl, running away like that! You should have let them gobble you up, yes. Then you wouldn't be in this fix, hrmm?"

Yoko readied her sword. "I asked who you are."

"And I said I am myself. Your friend, hrmm? Yes, and as your friend I thought I'd tell you something you might find quite helpful."

"What's that?"

Yoko found little to trust about this monkey. Yet she felt no tensing inside her, none of the telltale slimy slithering that meant Joyu was preparing for battle. Perhaps this ape-thing wasn't actually an enemy then, though it hardly looked safe.

"You cannot go home, you know."

Yoko glared at him. "How do you know that? You don't know who I am!"

"I know you can't go home! It's impossible. There's no way for you to go, none at all. Like to know something else?"

"Not really," Yoko replied, frowning.

"Oh, but I'll tell you. You were tricked, hrmm?" The ape cackled loudly.

"Tricked?" Yoko felt like a bucket of ice water had been dumped over her head.

"Little fool of a girl. Yes, tricked! Taken! Trapped!"

Yoko swallowed.

A trap. Keiki . . . had he trapped her? Was he the one?

Her hand shook as it gripped the sword, but she couldn't find the words to deny what the monkey had said.

"See? You suspected it yourself. You were brought here. Into a trap. And you're never going back." The creature's high voice stabbed at her ears.

"Stop it! I don't believe you!" Blindly, Yoko swung the sword. With a sharp, dry sound it cut off the topmost leaves of the bush in front of her. Without Joyu helping she didn't even come close to hitting the creature.

"Cover your eyes and close your ears if you wish, but that will not change the truth, hrmm? It's because of you swinging that thing with such zeal that you're in trouble, girl. Put it down and maybe you'd just die. Save yourself all sorts of difficulties."

"Shut up!"

"Such a fine sword, you should put it to better use! How about cutting your own neck, hrmm?" The monkey threw back his head and cackled to the sky.

"Quiet, you fiend!" Yoko lunged forward again, but the ape was gone. She saw his head emerge from behind another bush a few paces away. He was grinning.

"Are you sure you want this? Cutting me might not be such a good idea, hrmm? Why, if I were gone, you'd have no one to talk to."

Yoko gasped.

"Have I done something wrong?" asked the glowing blue ape. "Why, I have been nothing but kind to call out to you so!"

Yoko gritted her teeth and closed her eyes.

"Poor thing, dragged away such a long way from home."

"So what should I do?"

"Not much you can do."

"I don't want to die."

"Then live! I certainly wouldn't complain."

"Where should I go?"

"Oh, not many places you can go, hrmm? Every place will be the same, I should imagine. Wherever you go, you'll be chased by people . . . or demons . . . or worse."

Yoko covered her face with her hands. She was crying.

"Cry while you can, girl. Your tears will soon dry and you'll have to find something else to do, hrmm?" the monkey sneered. Yoko heard the sounds of laughter drifting into the distance and lifted her head.

"No, wait!"

She didn't want to admit it, but the creature was right: She didn't want to be left alone. Even a bizarre, uncouth, and insufferably rude ape-thing was preferable to no one at all.

She searched the woods for that blue glow, but there was nothing to be seen. All she could hear was the creature's high-pitched laughter somewhere off in the darkness getting farther and farther away. Slowly it faded until it was gone, and Yoko was indeed alone again.



The pain would have been quick, and it would all be over . . .

The words sank into Yoko's heart like a knife. Try as she would, she couldn't rid herself of their contamination.

Her thoughts wandered, and soon she found herself fascinated by the glimmering sword that lay across her knees. The blade felt cool and hard against her skin.

The pain . . .

She shook her head, trying to think of something, anything else, but her thoughts were trapped in a circle, always going back to what the ape had said. Yoko sat and stared at the blade. It seemed brighter now. Yes, it certainly was—this was more than her vision trying to adjust to the dark. The blade was glowing. Yoko's eyes opened wide.

First the outline, then the whole surface of the blade became as clear as glass. She lifted the sword; a sparkle danced down the length of the blade. When she brought the blade closer to her eyes she could see a shape. She could see someone moving in the blade!

Then she heard a sound: the high, far-off echoing *drip*, *drip*, *drip* of water hitting the surface of a pool. Gradually, as if the ripples in a watery reflection were subsiding, she was able to make out the image in the sword.

It was a person, a woman, walking in some room.

Sudden recognition filled Yoko's eyes with tears.

Mom . . .

It was her mother, and she was in Yoko's room.

There was the wallpaper, white with ivory stripes. There were Yoko's flower petal curtains, her patchwork bed cover, her stuffed animals on the shelf; the book she had been reading was still sitting on the desk. She could even read the title: *The Long Winter*.

Her mother paced around the room picking things up. She took the book in her hand, flipped through the pages, and then sat on the bed and sighed.

Mom . . .

Her mother looked thin and tired. Her face was pale.

She must be worried sick. It had already been two days since Yoko left. Yoko had never even been late for dinner before, let alone vanished from home without a word.

Her mom turned to the shelf next to the bed and picked up a stuffed animal and began to weep, her shoulders heaving with stifled sobs.

"Mom!" Yoko shouted. Seeing her mother cry like that was too much for her to bear.

The instant Yoko shouted the scene was gone. Yoko's eyes refocused and all she could see before her was the blade glowing faintly; soon even that had faded and she was in utter darkness once more. The sound of dripping water had ceased.

What had happened? Was it real, what she had seen?

Yoko held the blade up before her eyes, willing something to happen; but nothing appeared in the darkened metal, and the familiar *drip, drip, drip* did not return.

Yoko shook her head, trying to hold back more tears. Her nightmare had become her reality; were her home and mother now only a dream? Seeing her mom made her want to go home more than ever.

If she believed what the ape had said, what the old woman had said—that she was trapped here forever—then all hope was lost.

This isn't a trap, she told herself. She was sure Keiki had some good reason for not coming to save her when she passed him in the cart. She hadn't been abandoned. There must have been some reason . . .

Thinking back on it, she remembered that she hadn't seen the face of the person in the woods all that clearly. She might have just imagined that it was Keiki. Of course, that was it! Whoever it was had certainly *looked* a lot like Keiki, but it obviously wasn't him. There were all sorts of people here, with all sorts of different-colored hair. She had just seen that golden hair and assumed it was him; but she hadn't seen his face, not really. Now that she thought about it, she was sure that the person she had seen was shorter than Keiki.

It wasn't him.

It isn't Keiki. He would never abandon Yoko. And if he couldn't come to her for some reason, she would have to go find him. Then she could go home.

She grabbed the hilt of the sword firmly and felt a tingling run down her spine.

"Joyu?" she whispered.

Her body stood of its own accord and settled into a fighting stance.

"What? What is it?" she asked, with little hope of a reply. Ahead she heard the sound of underbrush being violently pushed aside, and a low threatening whine like that of a large dog.

Could it be the demon-hounds? she wondered.

Joyu or not, she would never be able to fight in this darkness. She needed to get someplace with more light—anywhere but

here. She took one hesitant step, and felt Joyu stir in her leg, pushing her forward. Grateful for the help, Yoko began to run. Behind her, she heard the sound of something charging through the brush.

Desperately Yoko raced through the night forest. Whatever was chasing her sounded very fast, if not terribly agile. In fact, she was sure that it would have caught her by now had they not been in the woods where the foliage hindered its movement. She could hear her pursuer veering right and left, avoiding stumps and trees; once, she thought she heard it crash into a large trunk.

Then, in the distance, Yoko saw the faint light of a clearing. Picking up speed, she ran toward it and burst out of the forest.

She found herself in a sloping vale between two peaks. The tree line formed a sharp boundary, and the slope had been cut into a terrace. Beyond the terrace edge she could see the rolling hillside continue below her, lit by the white light of the moon. Yoko frowned—she would have preferred a nice flat plain for running. Instead, she turned and readied herself to confront her pursuer, as it burst out of the woods with a tremendous noise.

The giant creature was not one of the demon-dogs—in fact, it looked more like a horrific cow covered in long hair that stood up in bristly crests whenever it bellowed. When the beast saw Yoko, it whined like a hound, eager for the kill.

Yoko felt strangely calm. Her pulse was still racing and her breath was ragged in her throat, but her fear of the strange creature before her was fading quickly. She focused on what Joyu was doing, as the sensation of a rising tide rushed through

her body. A part of her mind made the detatched observation that whatever was about to happen, she definitely didn't want to end up covered in blood this time.

The moon had risen quite high, and the cold white light made the metal of her blade shine bright like snow. Then, the white blade was painted black, as in three strokes the giant beast was felled. As she approached its sprawled form to deliver the final blow, Yoko saw many pairs of gleaming red eyes gathering in the darkness of the woods beyond.

It was going to be a long night.

Not daring to sleep, always choosing the best-lit paths, Yoko moved through the forest fighting the demons that came at her in waves.

Perhaps there was some truth to the idea that monsters came out at night, Yoko thought, for she was attacked many times before dawn. Though she had time to rest between the onslaughts, and even with the healing power of the gem to replenish her strength, she was starting to feel a deep fatigue weigh down her arms and legs. Before long, she was leaning on the hilt of the sword, thrusting it into the ground and using it like a cane as she walked.

The attacks became less frequent when the sky brightened, and stopped entirely when the first rays of dawn broke over the tops of the mountains. Yoko had found a path that appeared to be manmade; but now that it was light she didn't want to run into anyone, so she resisted the temptation to lie down and sleep in the mud at the wayside. Forcing her limp legs and arms to carry her a little farther, she crawled away from the path

where the forest was deepest. After a short distance, she found a soft patch of grass in a sheltered hollow, where she collapsed immediately and slept, hugging the sword close to her body.

CHAPTER THREE

For three days, Yoko slept when the sun was high, woke as dusk was falling, and fought her way through the night. She roamed without aim or destination, sleeping on beds of grass, eating what nuts and berries she could find.

Each night's exertions left her so exhausted that she had no trouble sleeping the next day despite the ever-fiercer hunger that gnawed at her stomach like a swarm of insects. As long as she gripped the pale blue gem she wouldn't die of starvation, but its magical properties had definitely stopped short of filling her belly.

On the fourth day, she had a moment of clarity. She realized that she had been hoping to find something without ever pausing to ask herself what it was she was looking for.

I have to find Keiki, she decided.

That meant going where there were people, a town or village. But wherever she went, she was certain they would identify her as a kaikyaku. She'd be taken again, dragged kicking and screaming right back to where this whole nightmare had begun.

Yoko looked down at her tattered uniform. At the very least, she needed new clothes. Local garb might hide the fact she was a kaikyaku—her strange new face and hair color certainly

made her look local enough—so finding clothes was her first problem. She hadn't been carrying any money when she was brought here, and she doubted they used Japanese yen, so her choices were limited. She would either have to use her sword, or steal.

Though she was reluctant to admit it to herself, she had come to this conclusion days ago. It had merely taken the last four nights wandering the mountains for her to finally work her courage up to the point where she could imagine acting on it. *This is a matter of survival, after all.* And it wasn't like she was plotting to kill someone and rip the clothes off their corpse. She would just . . . borrow.

Hidden in the shadow of a large tree, Yoko studied the village she had chosen. It was much like the others on her journey: ramshackle houses huddling in the shelter of a valley. The sun was high, and she could see people in the distant fields that lined the valley's edge—the villagers doing their daily planting, no doubt.

She took a deep breath, steeled her nerves, and strode out of the forest, making a beeline for the nearest house. The yard had no wall of any sort; the building's only defense was a small well-tended garden. The roof was black tile, the walls white and run through with cracks, the aged stucco falling off in places. A hole in one wall served as a small, glassless window. Metal shutters hung on either side, opened wide to the noontime sun.

Yoko approached the house, keeping a close eye on her surroundings. She'd grown so accustomed to the attacks every night that she had come to expect beasts and demons as a matter

of course, but the thought of *people* finding her set her so on edge that she was ready to jump at the slightest noise.

Peering in at the window, Yoko saw a simple room that seemed to serve as both dining room and kitchen. She spied a small oven and a table standing on an earthen floor. There was nobody inside that she could see. The room was completely silent.

She walked along the outside wall as quietly as she could until she reached a door in the wall, just opposite a well in the yard. Gingerly, she put her hand on the cool metal of the door. Her fingers found the handle and she gave it a light tug. The door slid open smoothly.

Holding her breath, she peered inside, not daring to enter until she was certain she was alone. Once she was satisfied, she exhaled and stepped through the door.

She found the first room quite small, the packed earthen floor surprisingly hard under her feet. The furnishings were simple, even crude—and yet the place felt like a home, with its four walls, furniture, and the other accoutrements of daily life. It was totally unlike the home she had left back in Japan, and yet at the same time it felt so familiar that Yoko wanted to cry.

Only a few cups and dishes were on the shelves in the room, so Yoko approached the only other door she could see. She opened it quietly to find what looked like a bedroom. Two beds, somewhat nicer than the raised pedestal she had slept on in the prison cell, were pushed up against the edges of the room. There were shelves, a desk, and a large wooden box about the

size of a wide-screen television. It looked like this was the only other room in the house.

She noted that the window was open—that would be her way out if someone decided to come home—so she entered the bedroom and closed the door behind her. She scanned the shelves directly ahead of her, but saw nothing of much use on them, so she opened the lid of the wooden box.

The box was filled with various strips of cloth, but nothing that resembled clothing. Yoko looked around the room again. There were no closets or other containers that might hold clothes. She decided the clothing had to be buried deeper in the box, and she began to empty it from the top, depositing its contents on the floor as she went.

When she had completely emptied it, she had found some small boxes of various personal effects, bed sheets of many sizes, a thick quilt—and some children's clothes, far too small for her to wear.

Just my luck, I've found the only house with no clothes!

Yoko hadn't seen any laundry hanging outside, but there was obviously nothing in here. She was stepping toward the nearest bed when she heard the front door in the next room open.

Yoko jumped at the sound. Suddenly, the window she had chosen as her escape route seemed impossibly far away. She would never reach it without being heard by whoever was in the next room.

Please don't come in!

Yoko heard light footsteps move through the other room and up to the bedroom door. Slowly, the door began to open. Yoko

stood frozen, standing in front of the box, cloth, sheets and children's clothes strewn on the floor around her. Reflexively, she reached for the hilt of her sword, then slowly forced her hand away.

She had come here to steal, yes, but not kill. She could certainly threaten someone with the sword; but if the person she threatened wasn't scared she would actually have to use it—and she was determined not to wield her sword against a human being. So, this was fate. She had gambled, and she had lost.

The pain would have been quick . . .

The door opened, and a woman stepped into the room, freezing when she saw Yoko. To Yoko's eyes, she looked middle-aged, with a large, sturdy frame—a farmer.

Suddenly, Yoko didn't feel like running anymore. She stood, silent, feeling a sudden sense of calm. She had been discovered. She would let them take her to the magistrate, and there she would receive due punishment. It was all over. She wouldn't have to be hungry or exhausted anymore.

The woman looked down at the cloth strewn around Yoko's feet, then spoke in a trembling voice. "There's nothing worth stealing here."

Yoko waited for the woman to scream.

"Are you looking for something to wear? You want clothes?"

Perplexed, Yoko stood silently. The woman must have taken that for an affirmation, as she stepped into the room, gesturing toward the bed. "The clothes are here."

She moved past Yoko and went down on her knees. Lifting up the edge of the mattress, she opened a drawer in the bottom of the bed.

"I don't use any of the things in that box. The one who wore those little clothes has long since passed on." Carefully she began lifting some larger clothes from the drawer.

"What clothes would you want? I only have mine, so there isn't much, I'm afraid."

The woman looked around at Yoko standing with her eyes wide as saucers. Seeing that no answer was forthcoming, the woman began spreading out the clothes on the bed. "If my daughter were alive, we might have had something. All of these seem a bit plain for you."

"Why?" Yoko's voice broke the silence.

Why wasn't the woman panicking? Why doesn't she run?

The woman stopped, looking up at her, but Yoko couldn't find the words to continue. The woman smiled stiffly, and continued spreading out the clothes.

"From Hairou way, aren't you?"

Yoko nodded.

"Quite the commotion there, what with that kaikyaku and all." The woman glanced at Yoko and smiled grimly. "Lots of hardheaded people in that town, with lots of funny ideas. 'Kaikyaku destroy the state,' 'kaikyaku are a bad omen,' why, they'd blame the shoku on the kaikyaku, too, they would, but how could one person make such a storm? Ridiculous!"

The woman stopped and looked Yoko up and down. "Why, dear, you're covered in blood!"

"Demons, in the mountains . . ." Yoko's voice trailed off.

"Attacked by demons, were you? Far too much of that going around these days. You're lucky to have survived." The woman stood, suddenly businesslike. "Right. You need to sit down. I'm not going to hurt you, and if I'm any judge of a person, you don't mean to hurt me. In fact, you look famished. You haven't been eating, now, have you? You're pale as a cavefish!"

All Yoko could do was shake her head.

"First things first, we'll get you something to eat. And you'll need some hot water to wash. Then we'll worry about clothes."

The woman walked toward the door, then turned to look at Yoko, still standing in the middle of the room.

"What is your name?"

Yoko opened her mouth but no voice came out. She merely stood, head hanging, hot tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Poor girl," she heard the woman say softly, and she felt warm hands rubbing her back. "You've seen terrible things . . . terrible things."

Everything Yoko had been feeling—the fear, the exhaustion, the desperation—came boiling out, stinging her throat. Slumping to the floor, she curled up like an infant and wept out loud.

"Wear these for now." The woman handed Yoko some white clothes from the other side of a small changing screen. "Don't

worry, I don't expect you to wear them outside. They're pajamas. You will spend the night?"

Yoko hung her head, overwhelmed by relief tinged with shame. She had come here to steal from this woman, but instead, when she had broken down and cried like a baby, the woman—who by all rights should have gone running for help—had comforted her, made her a bowl of warm rice gruel, and drawn her a bath of hot water in a large basin.

Now Yoko's hunger had been sated and the accumulated grime of nights of battle had been washed away in fresh, warm water. When she slid her arms into the sleeves of the clean pajamas, she felt human again for the first time in she didn't know how long.

"Thank you so much." Yoko came out from behind the bath screen and bowed. "I'm so sorry. I . . ."

I was going to steal from you. She looked up, straight into the woman's sparkling blue eyes. The woman laughed.

"It's okay, I know when someone's in need of something warm to eat. Here, drink this." She offered Yoko a clay mug full of cold tea. "And then it's time you got some sleep. I'll set out your bed."

"Thank you."

The woman paused. "Forgive me, but I had to put away your sword. It's not right to leave things like that lying out."

"Yes, I'm sorry."

"You sure like to apologize," the woman said, smiling. "And, you never did tell me your name."

"Yoko. Yoko Nakajima."

"Kaikyaku names sure are strange, aren't they? My name is Takkee, or at least that's what everybody calls me."

"Takkee? How do you write that?"

With her finger, the woman wrote characters meaning *good* and *elder sister* in the faint dust on the desktop:

達姐

Yoko smiled.

"So then, Yoko, where is it you are headed? Anywhere?"

Yoko shook her head. "No . . . Takkee, you don't know anyone by the name of Keiki, do you?"

"Keiki? No . . . I don't know anyone by that name. Is he someone you're looking for?"

"Yes."

"Where is he from? Is he from Kou?"

"I only know he's from this world . . ."

Takkee smiled. "That's not much to go on. You'll need to know what kingdom he's from, at least, and knowing what part of the kingdom would help."

Yoko looked down at the floor. "I don't know anything about this land."

"I suppose that's so." Takkee set down the mug. "Well now, there are twelve kingdoms in the known world. This is the southeasternmost, called Kou."

Yoko nodded. The old woman in Hairou had told her as much. "And the sun rises in the east?"

"Of course. Now, where we are here happens to be the eastern edge of Kou, a place called Five Elders Village. Walk ten days north of here and you'll reach some high mountains.

Cross them and you'll be in Kei." As she spoke, she traced the character on the desk with a finger:

慶

"Hairou, where you came in from, is on the coast, due east from here. About five days along the high road."

Until now, what few places Yoko had seen existed in a fog, the directions and distances unclear. Now, at last, a vague image of this world she had stumbled into began to take shape in her mind. "Just how large is this kingdom, Kou?"

Takkee tilted her head to the side. "I wonder now. I suppose if one were to walk edge to edge, west to east, it would take about three months."

"That long?" Yoko opened her eyes wide. It was hard for her to gauge distance based on walking time, but she was pretty sure that walking across even all of the greater Tokyo area would only take a few days, if that.

"I would think so. It is a proper kingdom, after all. You'd have a similar journey going from south to north. Then it's over the mountains or the sea and you're in the next land at last. Why, I suppose it'd take something closer to four months."

"And there are twelve of these kingdoms?"

Takkee nodded.

Yoko closed her eyes. A part of her had imagined this world as some kind of elaborate playground, something confined, limited. A country in a box. But four months just to cross one kingdom? There was no hope of finding one person in such a vast area, without any clues but a name and a memory of long,

golden hair. She might have to search the entire world, and that could take years. Decades.

"So, who is this Keiki, anyhow?" Takkee asked.

"I don't know, really. I only know he is from this place. He . . ." Yoko paused, searching for the appropriate words. "He brought me here."

"Brought you here?"

Yoko nodded.

"Really now? Well that's the first time I've ever heard of anything like that!" Takkee was obviously intrigued.

"Is that unusual?"

"Well, I never was one for reading much, so maybe it's just me." Takkee laughed ruefully. "And I don't know much about kaikyaku. We don't see your kind that often."

"I see . . ."

"But whoever he is, if he brought you here he's certainly not your run-of-the-mill sort of person. Not just anybody could go Over There. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if he were some sort of deity, or wizard, or maybe even a boggart."

Yoko looked up at Takkee. She was smiling. "Us common folk can't go Over There, let alone bring somebody back. Yes, I'd say your friend was someone special indeed. A warlock, maybe?"

"He's not my friend . . ." Yoko began, then she shook her head. "I know there are demons . . . but you have gods and wizards here too?"

"Of course. Mind you, they live in the world of Heaven, far from us. The gods and the wizards, all of them live up there. They rarely come down here."

"Up there?"

"Above the sky. Of course a few of them *have* filtered down. The governor is one."

Takkee answered Yoko's confused expression with a laugh. "Every province has its lord, you see. This here is the province of Jhun, and our lord is the governor of Jhun. Now, it's the king who gives him that post; he rules Jhun in the king's name. A governor is never an ordinary person. He is ageless and deathless. He has the power to commune with the gods. He's not from this world . . . something you have in common, eh?"

"So Keiki . . . he's from another world, too?"

"It's a good bet." Takkee laughed again. "Maybe he's a courtier? Most of the important folk are wizards, you see. Why, up in the king's palace—that's above the sky too—even the servants and messengers are wizards. They have to be just to go to work!"

Takkee smiled. "The king's family is a family of gods. They're the ones who appoint wizards and such. Now I hear that some people ascend to Heaven on their own power, but those are usually the wild ones: hermits, mountain dwellers, people who've thrown away the mortal world without so much as a thank-you-well. The long and short of it is, the rulers are from a different world than ours, and the likes of us never meet them . . . which I suppose makes you special."

Yoko hung on each of Takkee's words, hoarding them in her memory for future use. Every scrap of information seemed laced with special significance.

"Now they say that in the sea, there is a Dragon King who rules the waves. That may be true or it may be a fairy tale. Even if there was a Dragon Kingdom, I would think the people there wouldn't be normal people either, seeing as how they'd have to live under all that water."

"What about boggarts?" Yoko asked. "What are they?"

"Ah," said Takkee, nodding. "They're the most dangerous of all. The demons who can take human shape, they're the ones we call boggarts. They look an awful lot like you or me. Some of them look so much like regular folk that you can't tell the difference."

Takkee poured some more cold tea for Yoko from an earthenware jug. "They say that somewhere, there is a kingdom filled only with demons. But I don't know if that's true. If it does exist, that's another world all of its own . . . and a good thing, too!"

Yoko sighed in bewilderment. In just a few minutes, her knowledge of this world had increased tenfold, and with it her confusion. If Keiki was not a person, what was he? He had seemed so odd and outlandish when Yoko first saw him back at the school, but then so did all the so-called "normal" people here in Kou. Was Keiki one of those boggarts? And Hankyo and Kaiko . . . were they demons too?

Yoko frowned. "Have you heard of any demons with names like *Hyoki* or *Kaiko?* What about *Joyu?*"

Takkee looked at her strangely. "Can't say I have. Why do you ask?"

"What about *hinman?*"

Takkee's gaze grew more suspicious. "Yes, a *hinman* is a latch-swell demon of war and battle. They have no bodies, and eyes of blood red. How would you know about them?" asked Takkee, as she wrote the characters for *hinman* on the tabletop:

賓満

Yoko shivered slightly. So Joyu was a demon! Yoko didn't know what was meant by "latch-swell," but it seemed to fit with the bulbous jelly-like thing she had seen crawl from the earth, whose cold touch she still remembered at the back of her neck.

Yoko shook her head. She couldn't say anything about her experience with Joyu; Takkee wouldn't understand. For that matter, Yoko wasn't sure she understood. She fished around in her memory for other words she had heard over the last few days.

"*Kochou* . . . ?"

"Ah, a *kochou*." Yoko watched as Takkee shaped two old characters she was pretty sure meant *vermin* and *bird* on the desktop:

蠱雕

"A bird with horns, yes? Violent things, they're said to eat people. What about them?"

"One attacked me."

"Ridiculous! Where?"

"It was . . . Over There. I was attacked by a kochou, and I ran away, to here. It came after me, or maybe it was after Keiki. Keiki told me the only way he could protect me was if I came here, to this place. To your world."

"Well, well, well." Takkee muttered to herself.

Yoko gave a sigh and looked at the woman. "These kochou, are they common? Maybe if I knew where they lived, I could find out where Keiki is from, and why they were hunting him."

Takkee shook her head. "I wouldn't call them common, no . . . Why, if a demon appears in the mountains here, it's the news of the town. Demons don't usually show themselves near the living places of men."

"Is that so?"

Takkee nodded. "Although, truth be told, there's been many more of late. These are dangerous days. When the sun goes down we stay inside. Now, if something as deadly as a kochou were about, that would cause quite the ruckus. Still, something about your story bothers me." Takkee frowned thoughtfully. "Demons are like wild beasts. They might chase after people, to eat 'em or do some other horror, but they wouldn't have any cause to hunt a *particular* person. And for one to go all the way Over There . . . It's the first time I've heard anything of the sort." Takkee shook her head. "Yoko, dear, what have you got yourself into?"

"I wish I knew."

Seeing Takkee's concerned expression made Yoko worry all the more herself—particularly when she considered what the woman had said. Yoko had assumed that demon attacks in the forest were an everyday occurrence here. Evidently this was not true, and the monsters *were* hunting her in particular.

What is happening to me?

"Well," said Takkee brightly, "sitting here talking about demons and the like won't do us any good. Now, Yoko, do you know where it is you will go?"

Yoko met the woman's eyes uncertainly and shook her head. "I only know to look for Keiki. I can't think of anything else."

They might be demons or boggarts or worse, but she was sure that Keiki and the beasts that ran with him would not harm her.

"It will take time. I do not think it will be easy."

Yoko nodded.

"And in the meantime, you have to live. You could stay here; but if the others found you, they might send you off to the magistrate. I could say you're a relative, but I don't think that ruse would last for long."

"I couldn't impose on you like that."

Takkee shook her head and smiled. "If you go southwest a three days' walk, there is a town called Kasai. My mama lives there. She runs a guest lodge. And if it meant getting good help, why she wouldn't think of sending you off to the magistrate, even if she did know who you are. You do want to work, right?"

"Yes," Yoko replied without hesitation. Finding Keiki wouldn't be easy, but she had begun to realize that if she wanted any hope of succeeding, she needed a place to stay first. The sooner the endless nights of fending off demons and falling asleep hungry on the hard ground ended, the better.

Takkee laughed and nodded. "Good for you. And don't worry, the work won't be that hard. All the other kids there are good workers, and good people, what's more. I'm sure you'll get along famously. You can leave tomorrow."

"Okay!"

Takkee smiled, happy. "Now get some rest. Sleep tight. If you wake up tomorrow and find you're not up to the journey, you could always stay here a little longer."

Yoko smiled despite herself and bowed her head—both in thanks and to hide the tears of gratitude that filled her eyes.

Yoko was so relieved to be sleeping on a real bed that she fell asleep immediately—only to wake in the middle of night.

She looked across the room at the other bed and saw the kind woman who had taken her in lying in a deep and easy sleep. Yoko sat up in bed and pulled her legs up to her chest, feeling the tug of the pajamas' simple weave on her skin.

With the window shutters closed, the room was dead quiet and almost perfectly dark. The heavy roof above and thick walls on all sides kept out even the usual sounds of the night that she had become so accustomed to hearing.

Yoko swung her feet off the bed and stepped lightly across the bedroom and into the dining-kitchen. Finding her sword on a high shelf, she took it down and held it in her arms, breathing a sigh of relief. Over the past few days, darkness had meant danger, and she felt uneasy if she wasn't holding the hilt of her sword at all times. She sat down on a chair and inspected the cloth that Takkee had wrapped as a protection around the blade.

Yoko almost dared to dream that she might not need to use the sword again. Only a three day's walk to the town of Kasai, to Takkee's mother's lodge, and there she would have more than

a job—she would have a place in this world. What sort of person was Takkee's mother? What would the other people working there be like? She had never held a job before, but she felt more enthusiasm than anxiety at the prospect.

She would sleep under a roof, wake in the morning, work through the day, and sleep again at night. Yoko might not be able to go back home or find Keiki, but maybe that wouldn't matter after a while. She might be so busy with work that she wouldn't even have time to think about those sorts of things.

For the first time, Yoko felt like she had begun to find her footing in this strange place. With the sense of relief came a sudden new wave of exhaustion, and she closed her eyes.

That was when she heard the sound: the high, far-off *drip*, *drip*, *drip* of water.

Yoko opened her eyes and looked at the sword. A wan light was spilling from beneath the cloth that covered it. Gingerly, Yoko unwrapped the blade and found it shining as it had several nights before. And like before, she saw vague forms reflected in the cool steel of the blade.

Gradually, the scene came into focus—the forms taking on depth, their shapes growing clear. Again, Yoko saw her room back home as distinctly as if she were watching it on a movie screen. It seemed so real she thought she might touch it if she reached out a hand, but she knew this was not so—the sound of water dripping in a cave was proof enough that this was only a vision like the others.

Once more, Yoko saw her mother's image in the blade. She was wandering through Yoko's room, pacing around, opening

drawers, fiddling in the closet. She looked as though she was searching for something. When she had opened the dresser for the tenth time, Yoko saw the door to the room open. Her father appeared in the doorway.

"Isn't it bath time?" She could hear her father's voice clearly.

Her mother quickly glanced up, then went back to the dresser. *"Go ahead. The water's in the tub."*

"Have you seen my pajamas?"

"Can't you find them yourself?"

Yoko's mother's voice had a hard edge. Her father frowned, seeming even more perturbed than she.

"What good is fretting about her going to do?"

"I'm not fretting. I'm working on something. Find your pajamas yourself."

When he answered, her father's voice was low. *"Yoko's gone, okay? Lingering in here isn't going to bring her back."*

Gone? thought Yoko.

"She's not gone, she's . . ."

"She ran away from home. You heard about the man that came to her school. And their friend outside who broke the glass? Yoko was obviously associating with these people behind our backs."

"That's not like her. Not my Yoko."

"You just couldn't see it. You know, I bet she was dyeing her hair after all."

"You're wrong."

"Stories of kids falling into the wrong crowd and running away from home are a dime a dozen. She'll tire of it soon and come back. Don't worry."

"It's just not like Yoko. I didn't raise her to be like this," her mother insisted fiercely, shooting her husband a spiteful glare. He returned the look.

"That's what all the parents say. Look, it sounds like the man who came into her school had his hair dyed, too. Maybe it's one of those gang things? In any case, she was just hanging with the wrong crowd. That's who she was."

"How can you say that?" her mother shouted, years of pent-up frustration finally finding a voice. *"What do you know? All you've ever done is work and more work. I raised Yoko! She's my daughter and I know her."*

"Calm down! I know her, too. I am her father, after all."

"Father? You?"

"Ritsuko . . ."

Yoko couldn't remember the last time she had heard her father call her mother by her first name. It was always "Mom."

"Does going to work and making money make you her father? Did you even miss a day of work when she disappeared? You've done nothing! Does that make you a father?! 'That's who she was'? You don't know half of who she was. Who she is!"

Her father seemed more startled than angry. He waved his hand for peace. *"Now, just calm down . . ."*

"Oh, I'm calm. I've never been this calm before. Our daughter's in danger. I have to keep myself together. Who's going to get her back if not me?"

"We've all got our roles to play. If you're as calm as you say, you'll know what you need to do. Things will work out."

"What I need to do? What, find your pajamas? Is that somehow more important than worrying about our daughter? Have you ever thought about anyone but yourself?"

Yoko's father's face darkened with rage. Her mother skewered him with a cold stare. *"She was a good girl. She never talked back, never questioned, never rebelled. She was gentle and predictable. She never gave us cause for worry until now. And . . . she would talk to me about everything, anything. She wasn't the type to run away from home. She was happy . . ."* Her words choked off in a sob.

At the door, her father stood silently, eyes averted. When he finally spoke again, his voice was low and utterly without warmth. *"Yoko left her bag at school, you know. And her coat. And you think she ran away from home? Something's happened to her. That's the only explanation for this."*

"So what, then?" Yoko's mother looked up him. *"What are you suggesting?"*

He answered with difficulty, after a pause. *"You say you want to do something . . . but if she's been caught up in some sort of incident, what could you possibly do that we haven't already done? We've told the police. How is our sitting here, floundering about in the darkness, going to bring Yoko back?"*

"How can you give up like that?"

"It's not giving up, it's reality! Should we go out and paste her photograph on telephone poles? Will that bring her back? I don't mean to sound cruel, but . . ."

"You do."

"If she didn't run away from home, if she got wrapped up in something, well, then Yoko is probably dead."

"No!"

"Come on, you watch the news. You know as well as I do what happens when girls go missing like this. I'm only saying that Yoko might've run away to make you feel better not because I think it's so!"

Yoko watched as her mother collapsed sobbing. Her father stood there glaring at her and then stomped out of the room.

Mom . . . Dad . . .

It was painful to watch. The scene blurred, and Yoko closed her eyes and felt a trickle of hot tears rolling down her cheeks. When she looked again the image was gone.

The cold steel of the sword was dark in her hands, now. The cheerless blade felt suddenly heavy and Yoko lowered it to the floor. Then she hung her head, letting the tears run unchecked down her face.

I'm not *dead!*

Yoko knew she was alive, though she was no more able to prove it to her mother than if she had actually been killed somehow; and in some ways, death would have been preferable to her current situation.

I didn't run away from home.

Yoko wanted to go home more than anything in the world. She wanted to see her parents and reassure them that she would never run away.

That was the first time I ever saw them fight . . .

Yoko rested her forehead on the table and closed her eyes. The tears kept coming even though part of her knew that the vision might not even have been real.

She sat up, wiped away her tears, and rewrapped the sword in the cloth. For all she knew, the sword was showing her phantasms, nothing more. Still, she felt the truth of what she had seen in her bones.

Her heart heavy in her chest, Yoko opened the rear door of the cottage and stepped out into the night.

The sky was filled with stars, yet not a single constellation was familiar to her. Then again, she had never had much interest in learning the constellations. *Maybe I just missed these ones?*

She sat down on the edge of the well and drew up her bare feet, perching with her knees hugged to her chest. The feel of the cold stone and the cool night breeze calmed her a bit. The wetness on her face was just beginning to dry when she heard a voice behind her—a nasty, singsong voice like a thorn pricking at her ears.

"Oh, you can't go hoooooome."

She turned around slowly to see a familiar, smirking visage peering over the solid stone wall at the far side of the well. The blue monkey's head looked almost as though it had been cut off and laid to rest upon the stone—a grinning bust without a body.

"Still haven't given up, hrmm? You know you can't go home. You want to go home though, don't you? Want to see your mother? Cry all you wish; you're never going back."

Yoko's hand went to her side and grasped only air—she had forgotten the sword inside.

"Like I said before, hrmm? Cut off your own head and be done with it. Oh, it'd be so eeeeasy. No hopes, no sorrows, all gone, gone!"

"You're right," said Yoko. "But I've not given up. I will go home. I don't care how long it takes."

The ape cackled with laughter. "As you wish, as you wish! Oh, but I've a morsel for you, little fish!"

"I'm not listening," she replied, getting to her feet.

"Oh, but you should! It's information about *her*, you see, the woman inside."

"Takkee?"

Yoko looked up to see the ape-thing bearing its teeth at her.

"You shouldn't trust her."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Oh, you fancy her an angel, a kind being from above, but she's not half as good a person as you hope she is, not even a quarter! Lucky, lucky you, no poison in the gruel this night, hrmm?"

"I knew I shouldn't have listened to you."

"Skin your flesh and stuff you to hang on the wall, or sell you off into slavery, it's all the same to her. And you would thank her for it, you would! Foolish, foolish girl."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"I speak out of the kindness of my heart! You can't see it, can you? You have no friends here. No one who would care if you died. In fact, most of them would prefer you dead."

Yoko glared at the monkey, eliciting another grating cackle from its oversized mouth. "Yes, the pain would have been so quick! You could have ended it all back there in the woods,

hrmm? I'm sure the doggies would have loved to help." The creature laughed even louder, then shot her a menacing grin. "Take my advice: let her feel your blade!"

"What . . . ?"

"Cut the woman down, take what money she has, and run, little girl. Run! If you still cling to this fantasy that you'll actually survive all this, you'd best make haste while you have the chance."

"Enough!"

Laughing maniacally, the monkey abruptly vanished into the darkness once again. Just like the other night when she first met him, the only thing that remained was his hauntingly sharp laughter ringing in her ears. Then that, too, faded into the distance.

Yoko glared in the direction he had gone. *What reason could he possibly have to say such things? I don't believe it, not a word.*

Whatever the creature was, it was a liar.

The next morning Yoko woke to someone gently shaking her.

She opened her eyes to find herself in the bedroom of the cottage, a large woman leaning over her with a look of concern on her face.

"Takkee?"

"You're awake! You look exhausted, dearie. Here, rise, have something to eat."

"I-I'm sorry. I must've overslept." Yoko hurriedly sat up. From the look on Takkee's face, she realized she must have been sleeping for quite a long time.

"Nothing to apologize for. Well? Do you feel up to the journey? Will you leave tomorrow?"

"I'm fine. I can leave today," Yoko said, sliding her legs from beneath the blankets. Takkee laughed and pointed to the desk beside the bed.

"There are some things for you to wear. You know how to put them on?"

"I think so . . ."

"Give a shout if you don't."

Takkee disappeared into the next room. Yoko got off the bed and picked up the clothes Takkee had laid out for her.

There was an ankle-length skirt tied with a simple string, a blouse that was something like a short kimono, and an overcoat the same length. She put the clothes on, feeling uncomfortable at the strange fit. Still wondering if she had got it quite right, she went into the next room to find breakfast waiting for her on the table.

"Well! You look good," Takkee declared, smiling as she placed a large bowl of soup on the table. "I hope they're not too plain. If I had some clothes from when I was younger . . ."

"Not at all! Thank you so much."

"These were a bit too bright for me, you see. I was thinking of giving them away anyhow. Well now, let's eat. Fill up that stomach! We have a long walk ahead of us."

"Yes, thank you."

Yoko nodded in gratitude and sat down at the table. As she picked up her chopsticks, the monkey's words from the night before flashed across her mind, but she quickly brushed aside the twinge of worry.

Takkee is a good person.

Yoko had only to think of the trouble Takkee was risking to protect her like this.

She's a good person. It would be wrong to doubt her.

They left Takkee's home shortly after noon. To Yoko's great relief, the journey toward Kasai proved uneventful—and surprisingly enjoyable. At first, she winced every time they met other people on the road; but she had taken Takkee's advice and dyed her hair black, and once she got used to the fact that no one seemed to be suspicious of her, she actually started to look forward to their occasional encounters with other travelers.

Looking at the landscape, the way the houses were clustered together, the way the hills had been cut into terraced fields, she could almost imagine herself in ancient China. However, this illusion was shattered the moment she looked at the people. The faces she saw seemed Western, and the hair, eyes, and skin came in such a variety of colors that at times she felt like she was in some kind of strange theme park.

She saw skin of pure white and jet black, eyes dark as coal and others that were startlingly clear blue. Most dramatic of all was the kaleidoscopic effect created by the innumerable colors of hair. She saw redheads with streaks of purple and older people with long locks of bluish white. Occasionally she saw folk whose hair was streaked with different hues as though it had been dyed only in parts.

It took a while for her to grow accustomed to the endless variety of appearances; but once she had, she found that she rather liked it. Even though she kept a careful lookout, she never did see anyone with pure gold hair like Keiki's.

The clothes she saw people wearing, like the landscape, reminded her of images she'd seen of ancient China. Men wore short coats with short pants, while the women for the most part wore long skirts. Occasionally, she would see groups of travelers garbed in particularly outlandish outfits that, while vaguely Western, she couldn't place in any country or time period. These, Takkee told her, were the wandering minstrels.

Yoko was happy merely to be walking. Takkee knew the way and arranged everything from food to lodgings. Of course, Yoko carried no money, so Takkee paid for everything.

"I can't thank you enough," Yoko told her as they walked along the road.

Takkee laughed out loud. "I'm always taking people under my wing. Don't worry about it."

"How can I ever repay you?"

"Repay me? Why, if it weren't for you, I'd have no excuse to visit Mama. That's payment enough."

Yoko smiled. "Takkee, did you move to Five Elders to marry someone?"

"No, no. I was assigned there."

"Assigned?"

Takkee nodded. "When you turn twenty years of age, the officials give you a field. My field was in Five Elders."

"So everyone gets a field when they're twenty?"

"Anyone and everyone. My husband was the old man living next door. We split when the child died."

Yoko looked up at Takkee's smiling face. She remembered the children's clothes she had found the night before. "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about. I was unfit for it, I suppose. Here I got this child and I had to go let it die."

Yoko stopped, uncertain of how to respond.

"Children are received from the heavens. That the heavens took her back can only mean I was unfit for the job. I suppose I wasn't ready. Poor child."

Yoko scratched her head and smiled faintly. Takkee gave her a wistful look. "Your mother must be worried about you by now. I hope you'll be able to go home soon."

Yoko nodded. "Yes. But I wonder if I truly can go home? The old crone in Hairou said I couldn't."

"If you got here, I should think you'd be able to go back. Don't you?"

Yoko blinked. Takkee made it sound so easy. "Yes," she said, suddenly smiling again. "I'm sure you're right."

"Of course I am . . . Ah, this way." Takkee pointed to the left. They had come to a fork in the road. Here, as at every other intersection to which they had come, stood a small stone tablet upon which were carved the names of nearby villages and the distances to them. The unit of distance used here, Yoko noted, was the *li*. The tablet here read, "Sei—five li":

成一五里

She vaguely remembered from her history textbooks that the li was used in ancient China, and it was supposed to be something

like two miles, but the li here seemed much shorter than that. At most it was half a mile long. So five li wasn't far at all.

The land around her didn't seem particularly rich, but it was peaceful and beautiful. The terrain immediately around them was hilly, rising to higher and higher mountains in the distance. Through the clear air, she could see all the way to a far-off range with peaks that looked lofty enough to pierce the clouds, had the skies been overcast. The air above the mountains looked pure and clear, though for some reason, Yoko had the impression that the sky was very low—that one might be able to climb to the tops of those mountains and touch it.

It seemed that spring had come to this land earlier than it would come to Tokyo. Flowers were blooming on the rows between the fields. Some of the blooms looked familiar, while some were flowers Yoko had never seen before.

Here and there in the fields they passed, they saw small communities of tiny houses all huddled together. These, Takkee informed her, were the villages populated by the people who worked the fields. Every once in a while they would come to a larger community surrounded by a high wall. These were the towns, where all the people in the area went to live for the winter only.

"So the people live in a different place during the winter than they live the rest of the year?"

"Yes, there's no reason to be in the fields in winter. It's true that a few odd types stay on in the villages during wintertime, but it's much pleasanter in the towns, with all the people. And the towns are safer."

"They all have those big walls, don't they? Is that because of the demons?"

"Well, now, demons wouldn't just go attacking a town. The walls are more for wars and to keep out wild animals."

"Wild animals?"

"Yes, wolves and bears and the like. Not many of them in these parts, but you do see the odd tiger or leopard. There is little to eat in the mountains in the winter, so they come down to the villages in search of food."

"So how do you get a house in the town for the winter? Do you rent?"

"Well, yes and no. We're each given a townhouse at the age of twenty, but most people sell those to merchants to use while they're in the villages. Then come winter, they rent a smaller place in town and move back."

Yoko nodded. Every town they had passed had been protected by high walls, each with a single entrance guarded by a strong gate. Guards posted at the gate monitored the comings and goings of travelers. Takkee said that the guards at the gate were always there, but Yoko noticed that they seemed to be stopping female travelers with red hair more than anyone else. Word of the escaped kaikyaku must have arrived from Hairou.

Inside the gates, the houses were closely clustered. There was always a long central road lined with shops. There also seemed to be a lot of homeless people in the towns. Yoko had seen some living under tents erected just inside the walls.

"But doesn't everyone receive land? Why do they live here in tents?" Yoko asked, pointing at the temporary dwellings.

Takkee furrowed her brows. "Those are refugees from the kingdom of Kei. Poor souls."

"Refugees?"

"Yes. Kei is in turmoil these days, you see. Refugees from the war and from the demons come here. Now that it's getting warmer, their numbers will increase."

"So you have wars here, too?"

"Of course. And not only in Kei. The kingdom of Tai to the north is much the same. Some say Tai is worse by far." As she spoke, Takkee wove her hand in front of her, tracing out the complicated strokes for the character *Tai* in the air:

戴

All Yoko could do was nod. Apparently, Japan was peaceful and safe compared to this land. Yoko had often seen Takkee check her luggage, and they never let their belongings out of their sight. Three times, suspicious-looking men had called out to them as they walked through the rural countryside, and once they had even been surrounded on the road. Each time, Takkee had dissuaded their would-be attackers with a barrage of colorful insults and threats until the men had left them alone.

No one traveled at night. Nighttime added the threat of demons to that of road bandits, and the town gates were all closed at dusk. The two travelers always took care to arrive at whatever town was their day's destination well before nightfall.

"You said it took about four months to travel from one kingdom to the next, right?"

"Yes, about that."

"Isn't there any other way to travel besides walking?"

"Some use horses or buggies—but only the rich. I'll never ride in my lifetime, that's for sure."

The land of Kou was also much poorer than the world Yoko knew. There were no automobiles, of course, and no gas or electricity. She hadn't even seen any plumbing or waterworks of any kind. She had initially thought it was because the civilization here was lagging behind that of her own, but from speaking with Takkee, she had realized this was not the case. It seemed that they simply lacked ready resources like oil and coal that had made industrialization possible in Yoko's world.

"So then," Yoko asked, "how do you know so much about other lands? Have you ever been to Kei or Tai, Takkee?"

Takkee laughed out loud. "I've never left Kou, myself. Farmers don't have much cause for long journeys. We've got our fields to attend to. But we get news of other places from the minstrels."

"Minstrels? You mean like the ones we saw on the road?"

"Them's the ones. Some of them have traveled the whole world 'round. They sell these little books, and if you look in those you can see what has happened in other places. The books are filled with tales of all sorts of lands and news from other prefectures."

Kind of like the newsreels they used to show in movie theaters before the spread of television, Yoko thought, though even that was much higher tech than what she saw here.

At the end of each conversation, Yoko often felt more confused than ever, convinced that she would never understand

this world; but it made such a difference just to have someone to answer her questions. She realized that her lack of knowledge about even the basic facts of life here had made her more uneasy than she needed to be. She felt as if she had been wandering in the dark. Now, with a kindly companion at her side, things were different. She was even starting to have fun.

In three days, her travels with Takkee transformed the world around her from one of hardship and danger to one of wonder and mystery. Though the words of the blue monkey lingered uneasily in her mind, and the nightly visions she saw in her sword made her long for home, with each new dawn she was reinvigorated with a desire to see more of her new world. Every village they reached held new and wondrous things to see, and Takkee was always with her, cheerful and generous. Thanks to the scabbard gem, the long days of walking did not tire Yoko half as much as they would have back home, and she could look forward to eating well every night and sleeping under a solid roof.

Yoko didn't know what gods were responsible for luck in this world, but whoever they were, she thanked them.

For Yoko, the three-day journey was over far too quickly, leaving her wanting more. Still, as destinations went, she decided she couldn't hope for better than Kasai, despite its somewhat intimidating appearance. From a distance the town looked like a single gigantic building, cold and block-like, looming on the

banks of a wide, languid river. It was considerably larger than any community they had seen so far—practically a city.

"Wow, it's so big!" Yoko exclaimed as they passed through the gates. She stopped in her tracks and gazed around in fascination.

Takkee smiled. "The only town larger than Kasai in these parts is Takkyu, where the territorial offices are located."

A territory, Yoko had learned, was something larger than a prefecture—which she had assumed to be about the same size as a prefecture in Japan, but she really had no idea how large any of these divisions were relative to the whole kingdom. It was all very confusing. She had asked Takkee, but her mentor didn't seem to know, either. As far as offices went, there was apparently a headman's office in each village for handling daily affairs, and larger issues went to the provincial magistrate's office; that was enough for dealing with the common people's concerns.

The main road inside the gates of Kasai was lined with shops of various kinds. In contrast to those in the towns they had visited before, these shops were all well decorated and quite large. For the first time, Yoko saw glass in the windows of the buildings and the décor with its gaudy colors made her feel as if she had stepped into some strange Chinatown. The afternoon light had begun to fade, and there were few people on the road, but Yoko could imagine that the main thoroughfare got quite busy when the day's travelers arrived each morning.

The thought of starting her new life here, in a city, was a bit of a relief to Yoko. She wasn't picky—at this point she would

have been happy with a hovel in some backwater village—but a lively city with all the new encounters and adventures it offered was far more appealing.

Takkee led the way down the main road, eventually turning off onto a side street that wove through a cluster of smaller shops. The buildings on this road were a touch shabbier than those on the main thoroughfare, but they seemed no less lively. If anything, there were more people here than by the front gate. Takkee kept walking until she came to the largest of the establishments, with a big open doorway flanked by pillars painted a lush green.

Yoko followed the older woman through the wide entrance, coming into a large and boisterous dining area. There she stood, gawking at the splendid decorations, while Takkee spoke familiarly with a man who came out to greet them.

"Call Mama, if you would. Tell her that Takkee is here—she'll know."

The man smiled broadly and disappeared through one of the doors in the back of the room. Takkee watched him leave, then directed Yoko to the nearest table. "Sit there. Let's get something to eat. The food here is great!"

"Are you sure it's okay?"

The restaurant here was larger than any at the lodges where they had stayed on their journey.

"Absolutely! Mama's treat. You can eat whatever you like."

Yoko hesitated, wondering what sort of dishes might be offered in a place like this. Takkee laughed, realizing her predicament; calling over one of the waiters, she ordered two or three dishes.

The man bowed and disappeared into the kitchen. A moment later, Yoko saw a woman who could only be described as ancient appear from a small door toward the rear of the big room.

"Mama!" Takkee called out, smiling as she stood.

The old woman answered her with a smile. Yoko smiled too. The old woman seemed even more gentle than Takkee. If she was in charge, the work couldn't be too hard.

"Yoko, wait here. I'll go have a talk with Mama."

"Of course," Yoko said, nodding. Takkee smiled and hurried over to her mother. Laughing, they clapped each other on the back and vanished through the small door. Smiling to herself, Yoko watched them go; then, pulling Takkee's bag close to her chair, she looked around the hall in which she now found herself.

From what she could see, there were no other women working in the place. All the waiters moving among the tables were men, as were most of the customers that had begun to trickle in. She noticed a few of them giving her strange stares, which she valiantly tried to ignore, but she found it impossible to relax.

After a while, a group of four men came in and sat at a table near Yoko. She happened to glance over and noticed one of them shooting her an openly lewd look. The rest were whispering and laughing to one another, and though she couldn't hear what they were saying, she couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that they were talking about her.

Yoko peered toward the back of the room, but Takkee was nowhere to be seen. She sat still for as long as she could bear it,

but when one of the four men stood and began walking toward her, her resolution cracked and she stood up.

Ignoring the man, who called out to her, Yoko caught the attention of one of the waiters.

"Um, do you know where Takkee went?"

The waiter merely pointed toward the back of the room. Taking this as a sign that it was all right to go back there, Yoko picked up Takkee's bag and began to walk briskly toward the small door. No one stopped her.

Going through the doorway, she found herself in a narrow corridor that led farther back into what were obviously the staff quarters. She felt bad, sneaking back here, but now that she was here she wasn't going to retreat until she found Takkee, so she kept walking until she came to an elegantly carved wooden door. She opened the door and heard Takkee's voice coming from behind a divider screen that hid most of the room from view.

"What's there to worry about?"

"You know as well as I do what trouble she could bring! She's a kaikyaku, and what's more, she's wanted!"

Yoko stopped. They were talking about her, and the reluctance in the second voice, which evidently belonged to Takkee's mother, was apparent. The unease Yoko had been trying so hard to put behind her suddenly welled up inside her again. It was as she had feared—they wouldn't hire her because she was a *kaikyaku*.

For a moment she thought she might rush into the room, head bowed, begging for them to let her stay, but then she

decided that would be too forward. After all, it sounded like Takkee was pleading her case. She should just let her talk this one through. Still, she couldn't bring herself to go back out into the restaurant, and so she stood, wavering, and listened.

"So what if she's a *kaikyaku*? It's not her fault she wandered here. And you surely don't believe that superstitious talk about ill omens and such."

"Of course not . . . but if the officials found out . . ."

"They won't if no one says anything! And *she* certainly won't tell anyone. Think about it! She's a real prize! She has the goods and is the perfect age."

"Yes, but still . . ."

"She's well raised, too. Teach her a bit about how to treat the customers and you'll have her working in no time. I'm asking a fair price, aren't I? Why the hesitation?"

Yoko tilted her head. Something about Takkee's voice seemed different, hard. And she could hear something else: the faint sound of the rushing tide in her ears.

"She's a kaikyaku, Takkee!"

"Exactly, and that's what's so great about it! No friends, no relations to get in the way. No fathers or brothers to come storming in here, demanding her back. Why, it's like she never existed at all. I should think you'd be able to see the value in that!"

"You really think she wants to work here?"

"She said as much herself. I told her it was a lodge. She thinks she'll be helping out, making the rooms or some such. To tell you the truth, she's a bit on the slow side."

Yoko stood, letting the words sink in. Something was very strange indeed. She knew Takkee was talking about her. But the warmth she had always felt when Takkee spoke with her had vanished. What was going on? It was almost as though it wasn't Takkee who was speaking.

"Still . . ."

"Please, the green pillars clearly mark this as a brothel. She ought to know that by now. Right? Come to your senses and pay me, quickly."

Yoko's eyes were wide. She clutched on to the bag in her hands, feeling a chill of shock run from her scalp all the way to the tips of her toes.

What did that monkey say again? Why didn't I listen to him?

Her pulse raced, half from shock and half from anger. She held her breath until it burned in her throat, and the sound of the crashing tide in her ears was as loud as an earthquake.

So, that's the way of it, is it?

Yoko's hand gripped the sword, wrapped in cloth at her side; she closed her eyes, and let her breath out at last. A moment later, with a strange sense of detachment, she quietly turned around. Walking swiftly back up the narrow corridor, she emerged into the dining area, cut across the restaurant as though nothing were the matter, and quickly stepped outside.

Turning around to look at the building, she saw that the pillars, eaves, even the window frames were painted green. That was why this place had seemed so different from all the lodges they had been in before. Why hadn't she noticed before? Yoko

moved out into the street. She still carried Takkee's bag in her arms, but any thought of returning it had fled her mind.

As though it were planned, a terrace window on the second floor opened just as Yoko stepped into the street below, and an elegantly garbed woman leaned out, gazing at the passersby. Her brilliantly colored kimono was opened far too wide at the neck, completely revealing her upper torso.

Yoko shivered, tasting the bile as it rose in her throat. The woman in the window noticed her glare, and smiling a derisive smile, she slowly closed the sash.

"Hey, kitten . . ."

Flustered, Yoko tore her gaze away from the second-floor window. A man she recognized as one of those who had been staring at her inside the brothel was now standing under the eaves, just a few feet away.

"Say . . . You work here?"

"No. I most certainly do not," Yoko replied hastily, turning to leave. Quickly, the man reached out and grabbed her arm; then he stepped in front of her, blocking her way.

"No? So you just came here to dine, is that it?"

"I'm with someone who . . . who has a friend here."

"And where is that someone now, eh? No, *I* think you didn't come here to dine. *I* think you came here to be sold." The man's hand moved to her chin, and Yoko hastily brushed it aside.

"Don't touch me."

"Feisty little kitten, are we?" The man laughed roughly, yanking her closer. "Care for a drink with me somewhere? A bowl of milk, perhaps?"

"No, I don't. Let me go."

"You *were* sold, weren't you? And now you're running. Well, let me help you escape! Just come with me . . ."

Yoko mustered all her strength and jerked free from the man's hold. "I wasn't sold. I don't work here. Now leave me alone."

She started to walk away, but the man grabbed her shoulder again. Lithely, she twisted out of his grasp; then, before he could reach for her again, she drew out her cloth-wrapped sword, hearing a familiar sound fill her ears.

There is an ocean inside me. A violent whirlpool flowing in reverse.

Yoko wanted more than anything for the sea inside her to burst through her skin and sweep the man, and the brothel, and the rest of this filthy town away.

"I said don't touch me!" She shook the sword deftly, throwing off the cloth, which fell to the ground with a flutter. The man blanched and took a step back.

"Hey . . ."

"If you value your skin, you'll leave me be."

The man looked at the sword, then at Yoko, then back at the sword. His mouth curled in a taut smile. "You sure you can use that thing, little kitten?"

Yoko said nothing. In one smooth motion she raised the blade and thrust it forward until the point hovered just inches from the man's throat.

Yes, I am a cat, and this is my claw. And it is very, very sharp.

"Go back inside. Your friends are waiting for you."

Yoko heard someone call to the man from the restaurant behind her, but she didn't want to turn to look. She had been reluctant to draw her sword for fear of causing a commotion in the street, but it was too late to worry about that now.

After looking back and forth between Yoko and the point of the blade several times, the man slowly withdrew. Then, when he was out of range, he whirled around suddenly and bolted through the brothel doors.

Yoko had just turned to run when she heard a woman's voice cry out.

"There she is! Someone get that girl!"

Yoko glanced over her shoulder and saw Takkee calling from the pillared doorway. A cold bitterness slid through her, reminding her of the spreading scarlet pool she had seen on the ocean's waves in her dream.

"She's a runaway! Get her!"

A wave of nauseating anger rose in Yoko's chest. She couldn't tell whether she was more furious with the kind-faced Takkee who had duped her so cruelly, or with herself for being so easily fooled.

People had begun to spill out into the street from the brothel and the surrounding buildings to see what was going on. Yoko raised her sword and twisted the hilt in her hand so that she could strike more easily with the flat of the blade. Whether or not that would enable her to get through the ensuing struggle without killing anyone was entirely up to Joyu. Yoko felt the

feral fury in her heart and knew that she wouldn't hesitate to kill if it meant avoiding capture.

I have no friends in this place.

She had thought that she had a friend. She had been so grateful to Takkee, grateful for the good fortune that had brought her to the woman's door. She had thanked her from the bottom of her heart, and now it made her want to vomit.

A group of men came running toward her, and she felt the familiar slimy slithering run down her limbs. With a smooth, graceful motion she raised the blade and darted forward to deal with those who blocked her path.

"Take her down! I can't afford to lose her!"

Yoko glanced back at the sound of Takkee's hysterical voice. The eyes of the betrayed and the betrayer met. Takkee's mouth clamped shut. With a frightened look on her face, she took two steps backward into the shadow of the brothel door.

Yoko watched her for a moment with a cold gaze, then braced herself to meet the onrushing men. She dodged around one, then two, and beat down the third with the flat of her blade.

In no time at all a crowd had gathered, forming a human wall around her. Seeing the growing throng, Yoko bit her tongue. She couldn't imagine a way out of this that didn't require bloodshed.

"Come on! There's coin for the one that gets her," shouted Takkee in a rage.

Just then, a cry rang out from the rear of the crowd. Heads turned, and there was a sound of great commotion. Yoko could hear screaming.

"What is it?"

"A runaway!"

"No, something over there!"

The human wall surrounding Yoko shifted. Beyond the nearest onlookers, she could see a wave of people pushing down the road, coming closer. They were shouting and running for their lives.

"Demon!"

Yoko's hand twitched.

"A demon?"

"*Bafik!*"

"Run!"

On cue, the human wall trembled and broke. Yoko joined the surge of fleeing people. From directly behind her rose an unearthly scream—a fearsome beast was charging through the crowd, striking down the terrified folk as it charged.

Its form was like that of a giant tiger, but this was no ordinary wild animal. Its bizarre face, like a wicked caricature of a human visage, was already streaked with blotches of crimson—yet somehow Yoko guessed that its unnatural hunger was directed particularly at her. Dodging the people who were rushing from the stores, she ran for all she was worth.

But it wasn't fast enough. The creature closed the distance between them in moments. Realizing she had no chance of escape, Yoko turned and stood her ground.

Unsettled by the bloodlust in the demon's almost-human eyes, Yoko steadied her grip and raised her sword. The beast charged toward her with the speed of a hurricane. At the last

moment, she dodged aside, swinging her sword in an arc toward the creature. There was an audible gush of blood, but Yoko saw nothing—she had learned in battle after battle with demons that she could avoid seeing the worst of the gore if she closed her eyes at the very instant her sword met flesh.

She cut the beast's broad-striped leg, and its charge turned to a stumble; it sprawled forward onto its face. Dodging its falling bulk, Yoko struck at the creature again and kicked it as it started to rise. Then she spun around and sprinted down the newly deserted street.

In moments, she had reached the main thoroughfare, where she ran into a wall of people milling about, confused by the conflicting reports from those fleeing down the side street.

"Out of my way!"

The crowd crumbled at the sound of her shouting and the appearance of the terrible beast looming behind her.

What?!

Something caught Yoko's eye: a swath of gold at the edge of the crowd. There was a man there. He was too far away for her to make out his features clearly, and she had no time to stand there gawking, but from all she had seen on the road, Yoko knew that golden hair was rare indeed in this world. It had to be him!

"Keiki!"

Unthinkingly, Yoko ran toward the half-seen figure, but the golden hair was soon swallowed in the mad rush of people trying to escape the demon.

"Keiki?!"

A shadow fell over Yoko. Looking up, she saw the giant tiger-beast vaulting through the air above her.

The demon's four thick paws came down amid the wave of people just ahead of her, sending several of them screaming to the cobblestones. Yoko halted.

Could that have been Keiki?

There was no time to think. Slashing with her sword to distract the onrushing monster, she seized her chance and slipped into a group of running people. Lost in the confusion, Yoko fled the town of Kasai.

"See? I was right," giggled the blue monkey from its newest perch, atop a stone marker at the crossroads where Yoko stood choosing her way. It was the middle of the night.

Having put Kasai behind her, Yoko was wandering once more, heading out along the highroad. She was traveling alone again, but she still had Takkee's bag with a change of clothes and the woman's coin purse. There were enough coins in it to keep her in lodgings for some time on the road, as long as she saved and always stayed at the cheapest place she could find. She didn't feel the slightest twinge of guilt at using the money.

"I warned you, I did. Foolish girl!"

Yoko ignored him. She started walking down the larger road, the faintly luminescent creature keeping time with her off to the side, but she never looked directly at the madly cackling

thing. She felt foolish enough at having been duped. She didn't need the monkey here reminding her.

Also she had something else on her mind that concerned her more than her annoying simian companion: the golden haired man she'd seen in Kasai and the demon that had chased her in the street.

Demons don't come into town, right?

That's what Takkee had said. At least, she had said it was really rare.

Demons don't come out during the day, right?

From her harried trip through the mountains, Yoko knew all too well that demons were rare in the daytime, even in the early evening. She could count the ones she'd seen in the light of day on one hand: the giant tiger-thing at Kasai, the dog-like demons that attacked the buggy taking her to the magistrate, and the kochou that appeared at her school.

And each time it happened, Keiki was there, watching.

The monkey's piercing voice grated at her ears. "Tricked, fooled, bamboozled! Tee hee!"

Yoko could no longer ignore him. "I was not!"

"Oh, but you were! Think long and hard about it, little girl. Test the truth of it with your tongue. It tastes funny to you, too, doesn't it, hrmm?"

Yoko bit her lip. She had to trust Keiki. Without him, there would be no hope to cling to in this strange land. Yet with each passing moment, she felt her conviction faltering further.

"Tricked, you were. Fell into a trap. He got you good, good!"

"No, you're wrong!"

"Of course you don't want to admit it. Why, I hope I'm wrong, for your sake . . . else you're in a whole lot of trouble, little girl." The monkey cackled loudly.

"Keiki protected me from the kochou. Keiki is my friend." Even as she said it, she felt the words had a hollow ring to them.

"Oh, he is, is he? Helped you much lately, has he? Come to think of it, it was just that one time, wasn't it?"

Yoko glared at the monkey. How could he know what had happened to her back home?

"What do you mean, 'that one time'?"

"Over There, when the kochou attacked you."

"And how would *you* know about that?"

The monkey shrieked with laughter. "Oh, I know all about you, little fool of a girl. And I know you're beginning to doubt. Doubting Keiki, hrmm? *And* I know you're trying to deny it, even to yourself. You don't want to believe. Nobody likes to see the trap they've stepped into."

Yoko turned away and looked down the darkened road. "It's not like that at all."

"Then why doesn't he come and save you, hrmm?"

"He must have some reason."

"What reason would that be? I thought he was here to protect you? Think about it, little girl. It is a trap, yes? You *can* see it!"

"He was there at the school, sure, but the other two times I never really saw his face. That couldn't have been Keiki."

"You know anyone else with gold hair like that?"

I'm not listening.

"Joyu knew it was Keiki too, didn't he?"

How does he know about Joyu?

Yoko's startled eyes met the monkey's, which were twinkling with derision.

"I know it all. Like I said!"

Taiho . . .

The word echoed in Yoko's mind. She shook her head. How could one word bring her so much hope and despair at the same time?

"No, you're wrong!" she insisted. "You have to be. This is all some kind of mistake. Keiki is not my enemy."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that if I were you. *Are* you sure? Oh, for your foolish sake, I hope you aren't."

"Be quiet!"

The monkey raised his mouth skyward and cackled gleefully. Then he whispered, "Say, I've just had an idea."

"I don't want to hear it."

"What if, just what if, Keiki is *sending* these demons at you?"

Yoko stopped in her tracks. She shot the monkey a withering glare. He was standing a few yards off, his mouth twisted in a sly grin.

"It can't be."

The monkey howled with laughter.

"It can't!"

"Oh, but it can!"

"What possible reason could he have to do such a thing?"

"I can think of a few." The monkey smiled crookedly.

"Well I can't! Why would he? He was the one who saved me from the kochou! He gave me the sword and Joyu . . . Keiki's the only reason I'm still alive."

The monkey chortled at her.

"If he wanted me dead, he could have just let those monsters kill me. Why would he have given me Joyu? You'd think it'd be easier to get the job done without that thing saving my neck."

"But he doesn't want to kill you, dearie. Imagine! Maybe he set them on you so he could save you and thereby become your friend?"

Yoko scowled and bit her lip.

"And why would he want that?"

"Who knows, hrmm? I'm sure you'll find out sooner or later. This isn't the end of the demons, you know."

Yoko glared at the monkey's smiling face again and quickened her pace.

"Yes, I think you do know," said the voice from behind her, almost thoughtfully. "You'll never go home. You'll die in this place."

No . . .

"Don't make it hard on yourself! The pain would be so brief."

"Stop saying that!"

But Yoko was alone. The black night swallowed the sound of her voice, and all was silent.

CHAPTER FOUR

Yoko followed the highroad for two days. She was alone, save for the occasional unwanted visit from the blue monkey. She walked without destination or knowledge of the way; her only thought was to put as much distance as possible between herself and Hairou and the bad memory that was Kasai.

Security was tight at the gates of each town she passed; even the travelers she met on the road seemed to always be on guard. She feared that word had spread that the kaikyaku who escaped from Hairou had passed through Kasai. She had been hoping to sneak into some of the towns she reached, blending in with the crowds to slip through the gates and find lodging, but she was forced to abandon that plan. There were so few travelers to the smaller towns that there was no crowd in which to hide.

And so she kept to the highroad, camping under the open sky. On the third day out, she reached a larger town with high, formidable walls. It was even bigger than Kasai. This, then, was the place where the territorial government was seated.

The towns she had seen thus far had only fields spreading outside their walls, but at Takkyu the shops spilled right out the front gate. On either side of the gate's main approach, a small city of merchants' tents and vendors' tables loaded with myriad

wares clustered under the walls. It was an outdoor market, bustling with buyers and sellers of various goods.

Yoko saw all kinds of items on display inside the simple tents. Strolling through the crowd before the gates, she came across a tent with tables piled high with clothing; on an impulse, she bought a set of men's clothes. Traveling alone as a woman was difficult. She could get out of most scrapes with Joyu's help, but she preferred to avoid getting into trouble in the first place.

. . The clothing she bought consisted of a drab kimono-like shirt, long enough to hang to her knees, and a matching pair of short pants. She had seen farmers wearing similar clothes, and even some women—though the latter were almost always either the poor or refugees from Kei.

Yoko left the immediate vicinity of the town; then, hiding in a copse of trees, she changed into the new garments. The sight of her own body startled her when she took off her shirt. In less than half a month, all vestiges of plumpness had vanished from her figure. She was trimmer than she'd ever been in her life, though she couldn't decide how she felt about that now. Her arms and legs had endured impossible stress, and even though she felt weak, she could see well-defined muscle lines running down her arms. At home, she had always been terrified of stepping on the scale in the bathroom. Now the thought of a diet made her laugh. She slipped on the men's clothing without the slightest bit of discomfort.

Men's clothes . . . Yoko's mind filled with the color blue, a particular shade of navy with a hint of indigo: the color of jeans. She had always wanted jeans.

When she was in grade school, Yoko had gone on a school trip to a camp in the countryside where they would be running relay races, boys versus girls. Yoko always wore skirts to school, but since she couldn't rightly run in a skirt, she had begged her mom to buy her jeans. When she brought them home, her father had gotten angry.

"Little girls shouldn't be running around dressed like that. It's not right."

"But everyone wears them, Dad!"

"Girls shouldn't dress like boys, and they shouldn't talk like boys. It's shameful. I won't have it in my house."

"But there's a track meet. I'll lose if I'm wearing a skirt!"

"Why do the girls have to beat the boys anyway?"

Yoko had tried to argue, but her mother's reaction had stopped her.

Her mother bowed her head, defeated. "I'm sorry. Yoko, apologize to your father."

At her father's request, the jeans had been returned to the store the next day.

"I don't want to take them back!"

"Yoko, do as your father says."

"Why do I have to apologize to him? I didn't do anything wrong."

"When you get married someday, you'll understand. This is for the best."

Yoko smiled suddenly, remembering. She could imagine her father's face if he saw her now: wearing men's clothes, a sword at her side, sleeping out under the stars. He'd go beet red, mad as a nestful of hornets.

That's the kind of father he is.

Girls should be clean and cute, subservient and kind. If anything, they should be too shy. They don't have to be smart, or clever, or strong. Yoko now realized that at least a part of her had thought he was right.

I don't believe it anymore.

Should she just bow her head and let them capture her? The heartless farmers in Hairou or the thugs in Kasai . . . Maybe she should have let Takkee sell her to the brothel? Yoko scowled at the idea. She gripped the hilt of her sword through the new wrap she had found. If she had been a bit more together—a bit less meek and "girlish"—she might have had the strength to confront Keiki. At least she could have asked him where he was bringing her, and why; what her destination was, and when she would be able to go home. She should have been able to ask these things. If only she had, she wouldn't be so lost now.

I have to be strong. The weak get hurt . . . or worse.

She had to use both her head and her body—push them to their very limits—in order to survive.

She *would* survive, and she would go home. That hope alone burned in her chest and filled her eyes with light.

Yoko brought the clothes she had been wearing, and the extra change of clothes that had been in Takkee's bag, to a used clothing stall where she traded the lot for a small amount of money.

Then, clutching the coins in her hand, Yoko wove through the crowd as it flowed into the main gate. As she had hoped, there were too many people for the guards to bother stopping

everyone and checking for a kaikyaku. Safely inside, she headed toward the middle of town. She had learned on her short journey with Takkee that the farther away from the gate one got, the cheaper the accommodations would be.

"What'll it be, boy?" asked the innkeeper at the first lodge she entered. Yoko smiled slightly. The lodges in this world were often restaurants as well. It was customary for them to take your order as soon as you walked in the door.

Yoko looked around the room. She was learning to tell the character of an inn by the atmosphere of its dining room. This place was nothing special, but it wasn't too bad, either.

"You staying?" The innkeeper looked at Yoko suspiciously. "Alone?"

Yoko nodded.

"It'll be a hundred *sen*. You got money, don't you?"

Without a word, Yoko pulled out her money pouch. It was typical to pay for lodgings after one had stayed, but it was polite to show that you indeed had the money to pay.

The local currency was the *sen*, which included coins of various sorts—square, round, gold and silver—but Yoko hadn't seen any paper money at all. The value of each coin was engraved on its face; the square ones tended to be more valuable.

"Will you be needing anything?" the innkeeper asked.

Yoko shook her head. The only thing free at a lodge was the use of the well. Drinking tea or taking a bath came at a price—another bit of useful information she had learned on her trip with Takkee. Yoko would eat at a stall outside the town gate where the competition had driven prices lower.

The man nodded at her and shouted toward the back of the inn. "Guest! Show him in."

An older man sidled out of the back, nodding, and gestured for Yoko to follow. Picking up her bag, she headed down the hallway behind him, relieved to have found a room for the night.

Still following the old man, Yoko climbed the stairs at the back of the inn, finally arriving at the fourth floor. The buildings in Kou towns were almost all constructed of wood, with the largest usually three stories high. This was the first she'd been in with a fourth floor, but the ceilings were so low that she could easily reach up and touch them. A large woman like Takkee would probably have needed to hunch to fit through the doorways.

Yoko was shown into a small room. It was barely wide enough to hold two beds, though there was nothing of the sort; only a bare wooden floor and a shelf hanging from the ceiling in the back of the room. On the shelf were piled two thin futon mattresses. She surmised that she was expected to spread them on the floor and sleep there.

The shelf hung so far down from the already-low ceiling that Yoko thought she'd have to kneel to access it. The places she had stayed when she traveled with Takkee had been much different—tidy little rooms, with high ceilings, beds, and even tables. Of course, Takkee had been paying something like five times what Yoko would pay for this room, and now she saw why.

Still, even cheap accommodations in this world had sturdy locks on the doors; one had to disengage the lock to get both in and out of the room. The old man handed Yoko the key for her door. He had begun to shuffle away down the hall when she called out to his back.

"Excuse me, where's the well?"

At Yoko's voice, the old man tensed and whirled around, his eyes opened wide. For a while he simply stood there staring dumbly at her.

Oh, right, the clothes. He probably thought I was a boy.

Yoko smiled and repeated her question. Still the old man simply stood and stared.

"Japanese . . ." he said at last, coming back down the hall toward her. "You, you're from Japan?"

Now it was Yoko's turn to stand speechless. The old man grabbed her arm. "A *kaikyaku*, huh? When did you come? Where are you from? Please, speak again."

Yoko gaped.

"Please, just once more. Oh, it's been forty some-odd years since I heard someone speak Japanese proper like."

"Um . . ."

"Me, I came from Japan, too! Come on, let me hear it again."

A light shone in the old man's eyes, buried deep in the wrinkled folds of his face. Suddenly, Yoko felt like she wanted to cry. What a coincidence. Another Japanese person, here, in this little corner of this giant town.

"Are . . . are you a kaikyaku too?" she asked, finally finding her voice.

The old man nodded vigorously. His wrinkled fingers grasped Yoko's arm, and she thought she could feel the intensity of his loneliness seeping through that grasp. She put her other hand gently over his.

"Tea . . ." he muttered in a low voice. "Would you like some tea?"

Yoko hesitated.

"Please, you must have some tea. I've only a little, but it's real Japanese tea. I'll bring it. Okay?"

Yoko didn't know what to say. "Thank you," she murmured.

After a short while the old man returned, bearing two steaming mugs. She noticed that his eyes were tinged with red. He'd been crying.

"I'm sorry, miss, it's not very good tea."

"I'm sure it's wonderful, thank you," Yoko told him politely, suspecting that it was just the opposite.

It turned out to be rather weak; nonetheless, the faint dry smell of green tea leaves soon had Yoko longing for home again. The old man watched her sip at her mug as he sat on the floor across from her.

"I was so happy, so happy to find you that I told the 'keeper I weren't feeling well and took a break. Boy—no, you're a girl, aren't you?—what's your name?"

"Nakajima. Yoko Nakajima."

The man blinked and smiled. "My name's Seizo Matsuyama . . . my Japanese ain't too odd, is it?"

Laughing inside, Yoko shook her head. He had a strong accent, but she could understand him.

"Yes, yes . . . it's been so long!" The man smiled, looking genuinely happy. A moment later he broke into tears of joy. "Where were you born?" he asked, wiping at his eyes.

"My birthplace? Tokyo."

Seizo gripped his mug firmly. "Tokyo? So there is still a Tokyo."

"What?" Yoko asked, but it didn't seem as if the man had heard her.

He mopped his face with the collar of his shirt. "I'm from Kochi, see. The island of Shikoku. But I was in Kure when I came here."

"Kure?"

"That's right, in Hiroshima. You know it?"

Yoko furrowed her brow, trying to remember her geography lessons. It seemed like so long ago. "I think I've heard of it, but I'm not sure."

The man laughed bitterly. "There was a military harbor there, with the naval arsenal. Me, I was working in the harbor."

"So you left Kochi and went to Hiroshima to work?"

"Aye, my mother was from Kure, you see. Her house was destroyed in the bombings on July third. I was sent to my uncle's house. I couldn't just sit there eating for free, so they sent me to work when we were attacked again. I'm pretty sure the boats in the harbor sunk. And in the commotion, well that's when I fell in the water."

Yoko realized he was talking about the Second World War.

"When I came to, I was in the Kyokai. Just floating in the sea, until someone rescued me."

Yoko noticed that Seizo pronounced *Kyokai* with a slightly different intonation than the locals. Oddly enough, it sounded more like a foreign word and less like the now familiar *Void Sea.*

"I see," Yoko said, not really sure of what to say. "That must've been quite an experience."

"There had been a bunch of bombings before that," continued the man, lost in reverie. "There wasn't much left of that naval arsenal. There, we had this fully outfitted military harbor and not a single seaworthy ship to use it. What's more, the inland sea and the straits out there were so full of underwater mines we couldn't go anywhere even if we had a ship."

Yoko nodded, listening.

"In March we heard that Tokyo got hit bad, burnt down to the ground they said. And in June they did the same to Osaka. Next was Luzon, and then Okinawa. By that time I didn't think we had much of a chance of winning." Seizo paused, looking up at Yoko. "We did lose, didn't we?"

". . . Yes," she replied after a pause.

He sighed heavily. "Figured as much. Huh, to think I've spent all this time wondering . . . Silly, eh?"

If Japan felt far away to Yoko in this place, the Japan of World War II felt even farther. Both of her parents were baby boomers, born after the war. Her grandparents must have lived through some hard times, but she wasn't particularly close to them, nor had they ever spoken about it. It all seemed like ancient history, a world she knew only from textbooks, movies, and television.

The Japan this man had known was as foreign to Yoko as the world in which they both found themselves now, and she

struggled to relate to his experiences. Nonetheless, it made her happy just to hear familiar place names and bits of history she remembered from home.

"So, Tokyo's still there, is it? I suppose the Americans run the place?"

"Of course not!" Yoko exclaimed.

The old man stared back at her. "Really, now? Really . . . but, miss, why are your eyes like that?"

Yoko started; then she remembered the face she had seen in the mirror. Her eyes were green.

"No, this is . . ." Yoko's words trailed off, and the man lowered his face and shook his head.

"No, no, I don't mean to pry. Here I was thinking it was because Japan was part of America. If that's not the case, then I don't need to hear the how of it."

Yoko sat, wondering what it would be like to live here, under these foreign skies, wondering about your homeland for so long. She too had been relocated unexpectedly and against her will, but how different it must be to leave your country at such a time as he had. At least she was sure that if she ever could go back, she would have a home to go back to. This man had gone forty years not knowing even that. It made Yoko's heart ache.

"And the Emperor?"

"The Showa Emperor? Yes, well . . . he made it through the war. Of course now, he's . . ." She was going to say "he's dead," but she amended her words. "He passed away."

"Oh . . ." Seizo raised his head suddenly, then lowered his eyes and lifted his sleeve to cover them. After a moment's

hesitation, Yoko reached out a hand and laid it gingerly on his rounded back; she felt the hardness of his bones through skin and cloth. The old man didn't seem to mind, and so Yoko sat there, gently rubbing his back until his sobs subsided.

"So sorry. Tears come easier in your old age."

Yoko nodded.

After a moment the man quietly cleared his throat. "So . . . what year was it, again?"

"Excuse me?"

The old man stared intently at her, a veiled expression in his eyes. "The Pacific War. When did it end?"

"Um . . . I'm pretty sure it was 1945."

"1945? Are you certain?" His gaze grew more intense. "That was the year I came here. When in the year? What month?"

"August . . . August 15."

Seizo clenched his fists. "August 15, 1945?"

"Yes . . ."

"I fell into the sea on the 28th of July." He glared at her as though it was her fault. "Only half a month!"

Yoko could only nod. She didn't know what she should say, so she said nothing while old Seizo launched into a long list of all the things he had sacrificed for the war. Gradually, his exasperation subsided into rambling reminiscences.

The night dragged on, and close to midnight, the old man started asking more questions about Yoko. He wanted to know

about her family, things like what sort of house she lived in, what they did for work, and where they ate. Some of the questions were difficult for her to answer—the memories were too fresh. Also, there was another thought lurking in the back of her mind: here was someone who was tossed here long before she was even born, and he hadn't made it back. What chance did she have?

Was Yoko looking at herself as she might be many years from now? Would she live forever in this strange place, never to return home? This man seemed so alone, trapped here for all these years with no one to talk to. She realized what incredibly good luck it was that they had met.

"I don't know what to think." Seizo was sitting cross-legged on the floor, his elbows resting on his knees, his face in his hands. "I left my friends, my family, I came here all alone. I thought they would die in the bombings . . . but you say it was all over only half a month later. Just half a month."

Yoko sat quietly.

"If I'd been there when the war was over, I would've had fun again. I could've eaten all I wanted, I would've been with my family, but instead . . ."

"It's not your fault—" Yoko began.

"Better if I'd died in the bombings. Better than being here in this nightmare where I don't know the land, can't speak the language . . ."

Yoko's eyes opened wide. "You can't speak the language?"

"That mumbo-jumbo? Sure, I've picked up a few words here and there. But that's all. You think I wanted to be working

this job? It's all I could do." The old man stopped and cast a suspicious look at Yoko. "Wait . . . Do *you* understand it?"

"Y-yes," Yoko stammered, "But—I don't know why." She looked up at the man. "I thought they were speaking Japanese."

"Ridiculous!" Seizo snorted, dumbfounded. "You call that Japanese? Why, except for me talking to myself, the first Japanese I've heard here in fifty years was today, from you. I'm not sure what language they're speaking. Sounds a bit like Chinese, but . . ."

"They do use Chinese characters, right?"

"Aye, but it's no Chinese coming out of their mouths. There were some Chinese fellows working down at the harbor, and they didn't talk nothing like this."

"But that doesn't make any sense!" said Yoko, confused. "I've been able to speak ever since I arrived. But I don't speak any foreign languages. They have to be speaking Japanese."

"You understand the other people who live here?"

"Yes!"

Seizo shook his head. "Well, what you're hearing ain't . . . it isn't Japanese. No one speaks Japanese in this place. You have my word on that."

Not Japanese . . . What's going on?

She didn't have the slightest doubt that what she had been hearing was Japanese. But this man said it wasn't. Yet, save a slight accent, she heard no difference between the language she had heard during all her time in Kou and what the two were speaking now.

"This country is called Kou, right? Written with the character for *skill?*" Yoko drew the character on the table with her hand:

工巧

"Aye."

"And we are kaikyaku, we came from the Void Sea . . . the Kyokai?"

"Aye," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"There's an office in this town, the territorial office, right?"

"Territorial . . . ? Never heard of that. Maybe you mean the *goujou?*"

"Well, I thought it was sort of like a prefectural office in Japan, like a government place?"

"Well, if you mean the most important person, that'd be the *kensei.*"

"What?" Yoko sputtered. "But the men, they said that they were taking me to the magistrate."

"Maybe you got the word wrong."

"Okay," said Yoko, taking a deep breath. "In the winter, people live in *towns*, and in the summer they go to the *villages.*"

"In the winter people live in the *ri*, in the summer they move to the *roh.*"

"But what I heard . . ." Yoko shook her head.

The old man stared at Yoko. "Who are you?!"

"I . . ."

"You're no kaikyaku—not like me, at least. Listen to me, girl. I've been alone since the day I came here. I left Japan and the war in the middle of disaster, thrown into this place where I

didn't know the language or the customs; why, I'm an old man now, and I never had a wife or children. I'm as alone as alone can get."

What was happening? Yoko was only half aware of the man's words as she searched her mind for some clue, some reason why she should have some ability that he did not. So far, she was drawing a blank. Seizo continued speaking.

"I went from the bottom and came back to the bottom. But you! You lived an easy life in Japan because of *our* sacrifices! And you get to have it easy here, too? It's not fair. Why?!"

"How should I know?" Yoko exclaimed, provoked from her confused reverie. A moment later she heard a voice from outside the door.

"Something the matter in there?"

Seizo hurriedly put a finger to his lips, and Yoko looked anxiously at the doorway. "I'm sorry, it's nothing."

"Yes, well, I'd appreciate it if you could make it a quieter nothing. There're other guests here, you know."

"I'll be sure to be quiet."

She waited until she heard footsteps walking away, then she breathed a faint sigh of relief. She turned back to meet the old man's suspicious look.

"You understood that, didn't you?"

Yoko nodded. "I did."

"He was speaking their language, you know."

"And . . . what language was I speaking?"

"Sounded like Japanese to me."

"But, he understood me."

"Seems that way, don't it?"

Yoko still felt certain that she had only been speaking one language. And she had only been hearing one language—the same language, she thought, save for the occasional strange word or odd pronunciation. How could she explain this?

The old man's expression softened. "Well, I guess there's more than one sort of kaikyaku."

When he said *kaikyaku*, Yoko again noticed a difference in his pronunciation from that of the people of Kou. Something about the intonation made it sound less like a local word and more like regular Japanese.

"So, how do you do it?"

"That's what I don't understand."

"That's two of us," Seizo said with a sigh.

"Why did I come here? Why are we so different?"

Why do I look so different?

Yoko reached up with one hand and lightly brushed her rough, dyed hair. "How do we get home?"

"Oh, I looked for a way. The answer is: you can't go home." Seizo laughed dryly. "If I could go home, believe me, I would've gone a long time ago. Aye, though if I went home now I'd be just a little bit like the boy in that story who wakes up an old man . . . Urashima Taro, was it?" The man looked at Yoko, and she thought she saw a deepened sadness in his eyes. "Where will you go, miss?"

"I don't really have a place to go. Can . . . can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Didn't they catch you, when you came?"

"Catch me?" Seizo furrowed his brow, then his eyes opened as though he had realized something. "Oh, right. They don't like kaikyaku here, do they? No, no, it was different for me. I came to Kei first, you see."

"Kei? The neighboring kingdom?"

"Aye. Seems that they treat kaikyaku differently in different lands. When I came to Kei, they made me a citizen on the spot. I lived there until just last year, when the king passed away and things got a little shaky. It was too much trouble living there after that, so I ran away to here."

Yoko remembered the refugees she had seen in town. "So they wouldn't chase me if I were there?"

Seizo nodded. "Not because you're a kaikyaku, no. Of course, it's worse there now. There's war, and the kingdom's in a bad way. The village I lived in was attacked by demons; half the people died."

"They were killed by demons? Not in the war?"

"It's one and the same. When a kingdom goes bad, the demons show up, and worse. Drought, floods, quakes. Bad things, one after another. That's why I left."

Yoko covered her eyes with her hand. For a moment, she had hoped Kei would be the answer, but now it seemed her options were less than attractive: she could continue living as a fugitive in Kou, or run to Kei where she might be caught up in war.

"Ah, and then there's the fact that you're a girl, though you pass well enough for a boy in those clothes of yours.

The women, see, they left a long while before I did. Before the old king passed away, well, she went a little crazy. Tried to drive all the other women in the kingdom out. Can you believe it?"

"How odd."

"It's true. I heard they were even killing women in Gyoten—that's the capital. Things were never too good there in the first place, and when she started driving out the women, lots of people took that as a sign to leave. Best stay away from there. It's a nest of demons now, I should imagine. Why, we used to get a lot of folks coming out of there every day, but the numbers have dropped to almost nothing now. Maybe they can't even get across the border."

"I see," muttered Yoko.

"Compared to Kei, Kou is paradise. But I suppose it ain't easy being a fugitive anywhere you go." Seizo gave her a sheepish grin. "I may not know much about Japan, but I can tell you loads about this place. I'm practically one of them—that is, except for the language thing."

"You still seem pretty Japanese to me."

Seizo laughed and raised his hands. "Maybe. Maybe . . ."

"Mr. Matsuyama, I . . ." Yoko wanted to explain her predicament, but she stumbled for the right words.

Seizo smiled, though she could see the tears glimmering in his eyes. "I know, it's not your fault," he said. "It's hard enough being in a strange place like this, without being on the run, too. I think you've got it harder than me in some ways."

Yoko merely shook her head.

"Well, got to get back to work. Take care of yourself, miss."

With those words, the old man rose and shuffled out of the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Yoko almost called out to him, but then thought better of it and simply murmured, "Good night."

Yoko took a thin mattress off the shelf, tossed it onto the floor, and sprawled down on top of it with a deep sigh. The night was waning, and it had been days since she had slept on anything resembling a proper bed, yet her eyes remained wide open. She could feel her mind racing.

The people of Kou did not speak Japanese. How did she understand them, then? She imagined what would have happened if she didn't; she had a pretty good idea of where she would be now. Yet, she couldn't even begin to guess how this was possible.

And what *was* she speaking when she talked to the man outside the door? Why did it sound like Japanese to the old man, but not to the others?

Then, when the old man used local words, they sounded a little different than when people of this world spoke them. That struck her as the oddest thing of all. And there was the issue of her and Seizo using different words for the same thing. Where were Yoko's words coming from? Why had he never heard of the magistrate?

Yoko stared up at the low ceiling.

I'm being translated.

Something somewhere, somehow, was translating words before they reached Yoko's ears, and then translating what she said in a way that anyone hearing her could understand—even if they spoke different languages.

"Joyu? Are you doing this?" she said aloud, twisting her head over her shoulder to speak to her back. As always, there was no answer.

When sleep came at last, Yoko slept as she always did, her sword clutched close to her chest.

When she awoke, the corner of her room where she had set Takkee's bag was empty.

Yoko leapt to her feet and checked the door.

Locked.

She ran out into the hallway and found one of the serving-folk, to whom she explained what had happened. He and another worker came and examined the inside of the room, then checked the door with suspicious looks. Their eyes went to Yoko.

"You sure you had this bag in the first place?"

"Absolutely. My money pouch is in there. Someone stole it."

"But the latch was locked."

"Don't you have a master key?"

The man turned to her with an even more suspicious look. "You saying that one of us stole it?"

"I'm thinking it wasn't here in the first place," said the other. "She planned this all along to stay here for free."

The man stepped up to Yoko. Gently, she rested her right hand on the bundle of cloth in her left. She could feel the hilt of her sword through the fabric.

"That's not true."

The man shook his head, smiling. "Maybe we should just have you pay now."

"But, I just told you, my money was stolen."

"Then we'll have to take you to the magistrate. He can sort it out."

"Wait . . ." Yoko said. She was trying to buy time while she unwrapped the sword, but then she remembered Seizo. "Call the old man who was here last night."

Yes, he will help me. He will back up my story.

"The old man?"

"Yes, the one from Kei. Mr. Matsuyama."

The men looked at each other. "What does he have to do with this?"

"Call him. He was here last night. He saw my bag."

The man in the doorway motioned with his chin to the younger man behind him, who ran off down the hallway. He turned back to Yoko. "What's that under your arm?"

"There's nothing of value in here."

"Oh? I'll be the judge of that."

"Once the old man gets here, fine," she snapped back at him.

The man gave her a suspicious frown. Soon she heard hurried footsteps coming back up the hallway. The younger serving-man had returned. "He's not here."

"Not here?"

"Gone. And his stuff with him. I think old Matsuyama flew the coop."

Yoko gritted her teeth. *How could he?*

Sad old Seizo, who had seemed so nice and harmless—almost pitiful—had taken her belongings. Yoko closed her eyes.

Betrayed. Betrayed by a fellow kaikyaku.

Maybe he couldn't forgive her for growing up after the war, or maybe it was because she understood the language. Or maybe he had planned to rob her even before he knew her story. He would talk to her, earn her trust, her sympathy—and then steal her things her as she slept.

She had thought she'd found a friend at last, a companion in exile. She hadn't the courage to trust anyone in this world after Takkee's betrayal, but he was a kaikyaku, her own countryman. He had seemed so happy to see her . . .

Of course he was happy. I was easy prey.

Yoko tasted bile in her mouth. Anger surged in her like a dark and stormy sea. She felt like she was becoming something else, a wild animal, fierce and uncontrolled.

"He stole it," spat Yoko, rolling on waves of anger.

"Nah, he's a wanderer. He just didn't like it here," the man said dismissively. "Enough chatting. You'll give me that bundle you've got there. I'll see whether it contains anything of worth."

Yoko grabbed the hilt of her sword and did not move. "I'm the one who's been robbed here. I'm the victim."

"And we're running a business. Can't let people stay for free, no matter how creative their storytelling is."

"It's not my fault if you hired a bad worker—a thief."

"Enough, girl. Give it here." The man began to close the distance between them, and Yoko dropped into a crouch. Her left arm moved swiftly, tearing the cloth wrapping off the blade. The light coming in through the small window glimmered off the cool metal, casting dancing light into the corners of the room.

"W-what's this?!" The man took a step back.

"Out of my way. I'm the one who's been wronged here, and I'm not going to be wronged again."

The younger man was gone. She could hear him running down the hall, shouting, leaving his coworker to stand in the doorway, confused.

"I said move. If you want your money, find the old man."

"You were planning this all along, weren't you?" the coworker asked.

"No, I wasn't. You find the old man, you take your money from my bag."

Yoko thrust the weapon out and the man teetered backward. She took three steps forward and extended the sword. The man slipped away sideways, turned, and fled.

Yoko ran after him.

At the stairs, she saw a few other men running up, perhaps ones the younger man had called. She waved her sword at them and they retreated back down side passages, clearing the way for her to race down into the foyer and out the front door. She burst out of the inn and plunged into the crowd outside, quickly losing herself amidst the throng.

As Yoko ran, she felt a subtle pain in her right wrist—where Seizo had grabbed her, that look of fierce loneliness in his eyes.

The pain was a lesson, she thought as she ran.

Never trust anyone ever again.

Once again, Yoko returned to her days of wandering aimlessly and sleeping outdoors.

At first, she more or less followed the highroad, hoping to make it to the next town. She had no money, so there would be neither food nor lodging for her there, but she thought she might at least get inside the gates and sleep with the refugees under the city walls. Yet, the more she thought about being in a large crowd, the more it petrified her, as did the cruel-faced prying guards on the lookout for kaikyaku at every town's gate.

I have no allies in this place. No friends.

It seemed that she would not be allowed the comfort of company or even food. If being in town meant more betrayal, Yoko preferred to fight the demons and sleep under the open sky.

If changing her clothes had made her seem less like a woman, it also made her seem much younger. At times, Yoko found herself surrounded by rowdy groups of traveling folk who typically treated her with a disregard that sometimes turned to threat—though these days she never hesitated to draw her sword at the first hint of danger, be it demon or human.

She took ever more care to give other travelers a wide berth during the day, and at night she held her sword at the ready to deal with the demons. If she slept at night, she might be attacked, and so she made the most progress traveling during

the cool hours from dusk to dawn and sleeping when the sun was high in the sky.

In the villages that lined the highroad, there were houses where food was sold; but these were only open to daytime travelers, and since she had no money, she had stopped eating altogether. On a couple of occasions, while driven by incessant hunger, she had tried to swallow her misgivings and look for employment—but the towns were swollen with refugees and work was scarce. A scrawny-looking youngster such as herself was even less employable than most.

Demons appeared nightly and sometimes assailed her during the day. Fear, fatigue, and hunger twisted her days together in an endless tangle of misery. Even worse, the blue monkey continued to plague her with its unrelenting taunting and whispering.

"Better to have died, hrmm?"

And then, there were the visions.

It was hard watching her mother weep. Still, she couldn't stop herself from looking into the blade when it began to glow—if only to catch a glimpse of something familiar. More than anything, she wanted to snuggle in her bed at home and talk to someone—anyone—who wasn't out to betray her.

The sword showed Yoko images every night, as if responding to her desire to go home. She wasn't sure whether the blade's power only manifested at night, or whether that was just the only time she noticed it. The dark times when she was too busy fending off the demons even to think of home wore her body ragged; and then, during the quieter moments, her aching

longing for home returned all the more forcefully, eating at her heart until she felt hollow inside. She knew she should have been able to ignore the sword when it began to glimmer, but she wasn't strong enough to resist.

And so, on this night, Yoko again found herself staring at the faint luminosity of the blade. She had run from a pack of demons across path and glade until she was deep in the mountains. Now she sat, exhausted, her back against the alabaster trunk of a low tree.

By now, the regular forests looked familiar enough, but these trees, which she saw only occasionally in the deeper mountain areas, were entirely alien to Yoko. Their bark was almost pure white, and their branches spread wide enough to shade an entire house—albeit an extremely low house, as even the highest of the branches were little more than six feet off the ground.

The leafless branches below the canopy hung low enough in places to touch the earth. They were thin, but deceptively sturdy—so sturdy, in fact, that Yoko found that even the sharp edge of her sword could not so much as nick them. The trees were like beautiful sculptures fashioned of porcelain-white metal. Golden-yellow berries hung from the branches, but when she tried to pick one it seemed fused to the wood and would not come free no matter how hard she tugged at it.

The white limbs of these trees stood out in the dimness of the forest and were visible from a distance even at night. They shone particularly brilliantly on moonlit nights, and Yoko had grown rather fond of the sight. Though the branches were low to the earth at their perimeter, if she worked her way beneath them, she always found enough clear space to sit close to the

trunk. Sheltering there beneath the white branches was like being in a kind of sanctuary; the demons came less frequently, and the wild animals not at all.

And so she sat, back-to-trunk, gazing at her sword. Ten days had passed since she met the old kaikyaku at Takkyu.

The sword was giving off a fiery light that reflected off the nearby tree limbs to form a halo above her head, and the clusters of berries shone like gold. Yoko expected, as always, to see her mother; but tonight many shapes were moving in the blade.

A large man. Black clothes. A young girl. A large room lined with desks.

It was her classroom.

As the picture came into focus she saw several of her classmates in what appeared to be study hall. She looked at the girls: their hair perfectly blow-dried and set, their uniforms pressed, their pale skin seeming cleaner than anything Yoko had ever seen. She couldn't help but think of how she now looked, and it made her laugh bitterly.

"Did you hear Nakajima ran away from home?"

The first voice to break the silence was followed by a flood of others.

"Nakajima? No way!"

"No, it's totally true! She wasn't in school yesterday, right? That's when she ran. We got a call from her mom last night! Boy, was I surprised."

Yoko realized she must be seeing a scene from a while ago.

"Nakajima? Who'd have thought!"

"Wow, she was class pres and everything."

"I tell you, the more serious they look, the more they're hiding."

"Totally."

Yoko laughed again. She felt like she was observing a group of aliens, the contrast with her current situation was so great.

"Did you hear that a bunch of strange people came to school to meet her? They say the guy looked really dangerous."

"A guy? Go, Nakajima!"

"So, were they like, eloping?"

"Could be. And all those broken windows in the teachers' room! They say one of her friends did that."

"For real?"

"What about this guy? Was he cute?"

"Oh, I don't know that, but supposedly his hair was real long, and he'd bleached it or something because it was all pure gold. He was wearing really weird clothes, too."

Yoko sat motionless before the vision in the blade as they talked about Keiki.

"I bet Nakajima was totally into heavy metal."

"You're so right!"

"I knew it! And she kept saying that she wasn't dyeing her hair. I can't believe I fell for that."

"Yeah—as if it would naturally look that way."

"A total lie, obviously. *No one is born with hair that color."*

"I heard she left her bag and her coat in the classroom."

"Huh, that's weird! Why would she do that?"

"It's true! Moritsuka saw them there yesterday morning."

"She totally eloped. You know, real romantic and all. Nothing but the clothes you're wearing . . ."

"I dunno. If she didn't take anything with her, is that still running away from home? It's almost like she's gone missing or was kidnapped!"

"Scary!"

"I bet we see a poster of her at the station tomorrow!"

"Yeah, and her mom will be hanging up those pictures all over town."

"'Have you seen this girl? Have you?'"

"Aw, come on, that's not nice. What if something really did happen to her?"

"Hey, don't look at me! I *didn't do anything to her."*

"I bet she just ran away . . ."

"Yeah, yeah. It's always the really good students who totally flip out, y'know?"

"My money's on eloping. You just know that beneath that straight-A face, the flames of love were burning bright!"

"Now you're making fun of her. I thought you were friends!"

"Friends? Come on! I talked to her, but I didn't actually like *her."*

"Yeah, she was such a smarty-pants."

"Totally!"

"She was always going on about how strict her parents were. Like she was some kind of princess, y'know? Like the rest of us got it easy or something?"

"Yeah! Not that I'm complaining, though. I mean, at least there was always someone to copy your homework off of."

"True. Reminds me, I still haven't done the math assignment for today."

"Me either!"

"Wait, did, like, nobody do it?"

"What? Do I look like my last name's Nakajima?"

"Yoko! Come back, Yoko!"

Laughter spread like a virus through the classroom. Eventually, the scene blurred and faded. Yoko watched the forms bend and twist on the surface of the blade, gradually losing their shape. She blinked once, slowly, to clear her vision, and when her eyes opened again it was over. The surface of the blade in her hands was dull once more.

Suddenly, the sword felt terribly heavy, and Yoko laid it on the ground beside her.

A part of her knew—had always known—that the people she'd called friends hadn't really been her friends. They were just peers, shoved into the same narrow cage as her, forced to stand shoulder to shoulder with her a while. As soon as they moved up a grade or were shuffled off into different classes, they would forget one another. After graduation, they would never see each other again. She was sure that would be the way of it.

Still, she couldn't stop the tears.

Yes, they had been friendships of convenience; but maybe, just maybe, she had let herself hope that there was something deeper hidden there—that one day she might find a true, lifelong connection with someone.

She wanted to run into the classroom and tell them all what had *really* happened to her. Their reactions would be priceless.

Theirs was a different world, peaceful and distant. Oh, they would have hard times too, just as Yoko had in her former life. They might even come to know pain, and this thought alone brought a smile to her dry lips as she settled back onto the ground to rest.

Yoko was cut off from that world now, completely alone. She curled up in a ball and shut her eyes.

Oh, she had *felt* alone before, after a fight with her parents or a falling-out with those same friends, or when someone had hurt her feelings. How wrong she had been. She had always had a house to go home to, people she trusted who meant her no harm, things to ease her worries. And even if she had lost all that, she would always have known she would be able to make new friends.

If only friends of convenience.

It was then that the voice spoke, still grating no matter how many times she'd heard it before, and she frowned as she lay there on the ground.

"Not going home. Tee hee! Can't go home. Ooh hoo!"

"Shut up."

"Still think you *can* go home? Why don't you try, hrmm? Not that anyone's waiting for you. Tee hee! Too bad, too bad. I suppose you weren't worth waiting for."

The blue monkey must have something to do with the visions in the sword, Yoko decided. He always appeared just before or just after she saw the visions. He never caused her harm, exactly,

just aggravation. That nasty irksome voice had a way of saying things she didn't want to hear; but he'd never lifted a paw against her. That probably explained why Joyu never stirred when the blue monkey came.

"There's my mother. *She's* waiting for me."

Yoko recalled the vision she had seen of her mother, picking up her stuffed animals, crying. Even if she had no true friends among the girls in her class, she knew that, come what may, her mother was on her side. Again the homesickness rose painfully in her breast.

"My mother was crying. That's why I have to go home."

The monkey laughed even louder. "Yes, yes, well, she is a mother. Always sad to see the little ones go. Got nothing to do with *you*, you see."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Yoko raised her eyes to see his glowing blue face, chin resting in the short grass, no farther than an arm's reach away.

"See, she's not sad she lost you, not really. She just feels bad for herself for losing her child. What? You didn't think . . ."

The monkey's words stabbed at Yoko's chest. She wanted to shout at him, to pour out her fury and frustration, but the breath caught in her throat.

"It doesn't matter who the kid is. It could be the snottiest, lousiest brat, and she'd still be sad, mark my words. Mothers are like that."

"Shut up."

"No need to look so agitated. I merely speak the truth." The monkey cackled loudly. "Like a cow raised from a calf, or a pig

raised from a piglet! Live with them long enough, watch them grow, and pretty soon you become attached. You see?"

"Shut up!" Yoko sat up and readied her sword.

"Oh, I'm terrified. Look at me, how I tremble!" The monkey laughed. "Still want to see your parents? Now that you know the truth, hrmm?"

"I'm not listening."

"Oh, don't bother telling me. I know. You just want to go home. It's not that you miss your parents, not really. You just want to be in your comfy bed, hrmm? Hot food on the table? Could care less about those other people. What do they matter?"

"What?!"

The monkey chortled. "Your parents won't betray you. That what you think? Are you sure? No, no, not you. How could they?! Not their little piggy!"

"Why you . . ."

"Or maybe you're more like their dog or cat. A house pet, hrmm? So nice, when they're cute, and they let you pet them. But so quick to get booted out the door when they bite the hand that feeds them, or mess up the house. Of course, your parents couldn't just toss *you* out. There *are* the neighbors to consider, after all. But if no one was watching, why, there are plenty of parents who would gladly wring their child's neck, hrmm?"

"That's ridiculous."

"Ridiculous? Oh, I entirely agree." The monkey's eyes shone with a mischievous gleam. "You see, what they like is the thought of themselves taking care of their children. Yes,

they love playing the good parents! Ridiculous!" His cackling laughter rang in Yoko's ears. "Aren't you the same, little girl?"

Yoko stopped her hand on the hilt of her sword.

"You too play a role: the 'good daughter,' hrmm? Did you listen to your parents because you thought they were right? Oh no, you were like a dog, watching his master's hand, aching to just bite it and bite it good, but so afraid of being hit."

Yoko bit her lip. For all their faults, her parents were kind people at heart. No, she had never worried that they would beat her or throw her out of the house—but, she realized, she had worried about lesser punishments: being scolded, seeing her mother unhappy, not getting the things she wanted. She knew that she had watched their faces for the signs of approval or disapproval.

"The good daughter! Good to her parents! Lies, lies, lies, told in every house in every land. And it's the good children who fear being thrown out the most, you see, so every day they must act like good children for their parents. And good parents, well, that's a lie too. There's no such thing. Only cowards afraid of what their neighbors might say. Ah, but it's so easy: you know there *will* be betrayal. You will betray your parents. Your parents will betray you. All people are like this, yes, and you are like each other! You betray and are betrayed in turn, hrmm?"

"Fiend!"

The monkey cackled even louder. "That's the spirit! Oh yes, I am a fiend. But an honest fiend. No lies from me. No betrayal from me, hrmm? Oh, so sad it is that you will not listen."

"Shut up!"

"You can't go home, you know? Better off dead, hrmm? What's the matter, don't have the courage? Then choose a better way to live with *that*." The monkey extended a scrawny paw and pointed at the sword in Yoko's hands. "So filled you are with lies that you lie to yourself. You have no friends! All are enemies. Even Keiki, he's your enemy, too. You're hungry, aren't you? You want to live better, have a roof over your head? Use the sword. Kill and take what you need."

"I said shut up!"

"Why the conscience? It's dirty money you'd be taking, anyway. Just take a little. Prick them once and send them on their way. That will get a roof over your head."

Whirling suddenly, Yoko swung her sword in the direction of the grating voice, but there was nothing there. The monkey's laughter rang out in the night, fading into the distance.

Yoko scraped at the ground beneath her. Her hands curved like claws, digging at the earth, and for a moment she thought she could feel her skin slough off, flakes falling from between her fingers.

Yoko was lost. She had no idea how many days it had been since she left Takkyu, let alone how many days since she had left home. She didn't know where she was or where she was going, and each passing day found her caring less and less.

The sun set, so she drew her sword. Enemies came, so she fought. The morning came, so she found a place to sleep. The

cycle went on and on, and Yoko saw no reason why it should ever end.

It had become the most natural thing in the world for her to walk leaning on the sword as if it were a cane, while gripping the gem in one hand. If there was nothing to fight, she would sit and rest. When there were few attacks, she would slow her pace, letting her feet drag along the ground. She found she had started talking to herself when she was alone, mumbling under her breath.

Hunger was inside her, attached like a new-grown organ inside her body. Once, in desperation, she had cut into one of the demons she had slain and raised a hunk of its flesh to her lips, but the foul stench of it made her choke and gag. She hunted for game, too, but by the time she caught something, she had gone so long without eating that her body would no longer accept solid food.

She greeted the dawn at the end of one of many nights and decided to leave the highroad to try her luck in the mountains again, but her fatigue made walking through the forest difficult. Roots pulled at her feet and eventually she tripped, tumbling down a steep slope. When she stopped rolling she slept where she lay, uncaring. She didn't even look around before dropping into a deep catatonic sleep.

She slept without dreams, and when she woke she found that she couldn't stand up. She was in a shallow gulch surrounded by a thin, scrubby forest. The sun was already dipping low in the sky. Night was coming. If she continued to lie there, unable to move, she would become easy prey for the demons. Oh, Joyu

would probably force her limbs to stand and fight off the first wave and perhaps the second, but she didn't think her body would last much longer than that.

Yoko scraped at the ground with her nails. She had to get back on the road—there, she might be able to ask for somebody's help. It was either that or die here. Her hands groped for the gem around her neck and grasped it as tightly as a lifeline, but still she couldn't muster the strength to pull herself up, even using her sword as a support.

"No one's coming to help you."

Yoko's eyes darted in the direction of the sudden sound. It was the first time she had ever heard the blue monkey speak during the day.

"Finally, some rest at last, hrmm?"

Yoko merely stared distractedly at the monkey's fluffy hair, like the fuzz of a blown flower, and wondered why he had shown up before nightfall, well before the sword would show her any visions.

"Crawl out onto the road if you want—you'll just be caught like a fish on the shore. Oh, they'll help you all right. They'll put you out of your misery! Snicker-snack!"

I suppose he's right, thought Yoko in a daze. But she had to ask for help. She wanted it so badly, though she doubted it would ever happen. Most likely she would crawl out on the highroad and no one would come. Even if they did, they wouldn't give her a second glance. Plenty of refugees collapsed on the road, and no eye was the wetter for it. She would be one of them—a dirty, forgotten vagrant. Nothing more.

If she was lucky, the travelers who found her might just decide to drive her off. Whoever it was would walk over to Yoko to see whether or not she had anything worth stealing, and would take the sword. They might even do her the favor of running her through with it before they left. That was the kind of place this world was.

Suddenly, a realization bloomed in Yoko's mind, like a moment of clarity in the throes of a high fever. In the few hours when she wasn't fighting demons or sleeping like the dead, she had often wondered why it was that the blue monkey plagued her so. Now, it seemed obvious. He was here to feed on her despair. Like a little scheming prophet, he spoke the unease that hid in Yoko's heart, and brought her to her knees. That was why he came.

Yoko smiled, happy to have solved this little mystery. The achievement gave her the strength to roll over. Tensing her arms, she dragged herself up until she was sitting.

"Shouldn't you just give up?"

"Shut up."

"It would be so easy . . ."

"Shut up!"

Yoko thrust the point of her sword into the ground. Firming her knocking knees, she gripped the hilt, the joints of her hands screaming in protest. She attempted to stand up, lost her balance, and crumpled to the ground. She was amazed at how heavy her body seemed. It was like she was a creature made to crawl along the ground, unable to stand, the product of evolution gone horribly wrong.

"You want to live so much? What's the point?"

"I'm going back."

"After all you've been through, you really think you'll live to make it back?"

"I'm going home."

"You can't go home. You can't get across the Void Sea. You will be betrayed and die in this land."

"You lie."

She had an ally. Her sword. She grabbed the hilt, and strengthened her grip. Nothing else to rely on, nothing to hold on to—only the sword would support her.

What was more, the sword reminded her of hope.

Keiki had given her the sword, and he had never said she couldn't go home. If she could just meet him, maybe she could find a way back.

"You sure Keiki's not your enemy?"

No. I mustn't think that.

"You really think he's going to come save you?"

I won't think that.

Better to find Keiki than wander aimlessly forever. Friend or foe, she would meet him. She could think of little else that she could do. She would meet him, and ask him why he had brought her here, and whether there was a way home; in fact, she would ask him every question she had ever wanted answered.

"So, you'd go home—if you could. And that would make everything right? Oh, I think not."

"Be quiet." *I know that already.*

Yoko would never forget this place, even if she did find a way to go home. She couldn't just return to her old life, pretending that none of this had ever happened. Nor was she sure she could be as she used to be, her old self, on either the inside or the outside. One thing was certain: if her appearance remained as different as it was now, she could never go back to being Yoko Nakajima.

"Oh, such a sad, foolish piggy."

The monkey's cackling laughter faded into the distance. Yoko sat up again. *She* didn't even know why she wanted to go home. Yes, it was foolish. Yes, it may have been a shallow goal, a temporary solution; but she thought that if she was ever going to give up, she should've given up a long time ago. It was too late now.

Yoko remembered her body. She was covered with wounds and caked with blood and mud. Her clothes had grown ever more tattered until they were little more than rags, and with every move she made they gave off a horrible stench that rose up to assail her nostrils. But whatever her appearance, she had defended her life at every step, and she wasn't about to throw it away now. If dying really was better, then she should have just died on the roof of the school at the very beginning when the kochou came for her. But somehow, this went against her nature.

It wasn't that she didn't want to die. Nor was it that she wanted to live. She just didn't want to give up.

Home. She would go back home, even if it wasn't *her* home any longer. There would be time enough to worry about what awaited her when she got there. Until then, she would protect

herself. She would stay alive—just survive. She didn't want to die in this place.

Yoko stood up, leaning heavily on her sword. She thrust it into the sloping ground and began creeping up the forested slope. Yoko had never known a slope so gentle and so short that was so bitterly difficult to climb.

She slipped countless times, urging herself on until she reached the top of the incline, where she collapsed. She looked up and stretched out her arms. There, a few feet away, was the edge of a road.

Clawing the earth with her nails, she crawled up to the road, her ravaged muscles screaming at the exertion. She rolled onto the hard-packed surface, and had just flopped onto her back when she heard a noise.

Yoko couldn't help but laugh bitterly at the sound that came from the other side of the road. *This place knows me too well. And it hates me.*

The voice she heard, rapidly approaching, was the hungry wail of a small child.

The pack of dog-demons that came hurtling in, animated fragments of night in the fading light of day, were much like the ones that had attacked her on that other mountain road so long ago. By the time she had finished dispatching most of them, her blade swinging heavily in hands numbed by fatigue and shock, she was covered in blood.

She whirled to face a survivor that came dancing toward her out of the undergrowth. The sword cut into its flank as she struck; then she pushed the weapon deeper, knocking the monster sprawling into a patch of weeds where it thrashed for a moment and grew still. The numbness spread up Yoko's arms and down her legs and, in a daze, she fell to her knees. A deep bite wound in her left thigh oozed blood, but she felt no pain. Her feet were blocks of lead.

Her eyes traveled down her legs, slick with crimson, then shot back up, looking for more enemies on the mountain path. One remained.

The last of the demon-dogs was larger than any of those she had already killed. It seemed stronger, too. Already she had clashed with it twice, but it appeared unharmed.

Yoko watched as the beast crouched low, preparing to spring. She steadied her grip on the blade. Over the weeks, the sword had become an extension of her arm—yet now, just raising the tip to meet the onrushing demon seemed an impossible task. Yoko felt horribly dizzy, and her thoughts swam through murky waters.

She swung her sword at the blurred form of the leaping fiend. There was no art in the swing—she hadn't even turned the blade so the edge would cut her foe. Instead she was beating at it with the flat of the steel. Even borrowing Joyu's skill, this was the best she could do.

Still, the blade knocked the creature back. The black shape rolled across the ground, then swiftly regained its feet and jumped at her again. This time she thrust the point of the sword at its nose.

The tip of the blade cut into the side of the beast's face, but not before the creature's sharp claws found Yoko's shoulder. The shock nearly made her drop her weapon, but somehow her grip held; with all her remaining strength, she swung again at the screaming, rolling shape on the ground before her.

The momentum of the blade was too much for her to control. Her whole body lurched forward, following the arc of the cut as the sword sank into the fiend's neck. She felt the edge bite through dense, black fur, then muscle and sinew. Then the weapon was free and still descending; the tip plunged deep into the earth beside the falling monster, followed by a fresh spray of black blood.

Yoko collapsed and lay motionless on the trampled ground, an arm's length away from the wounded demon. For a moment that seemed like an eternity, both combatants were still. Then, in unison, the two raised their heads and found each other with their eyes. Yoko's sword shone where it stood, its point thrust into the ground, almost within reach. The beast's mouth cracked open in a mockery of a smile and breathed bloody foam onto the dirt of the road. Thus they sat, staring at each other.

Yoko was the first to move. With weary hands she lurched forward and grabbed the sword's hilt once more, and, leaning with her weight against the weapon, she levered the tip out of the ground. An instant later the beast sprang up, but it was too wounded to stand. Still kneeling, Yoko watched as it wobbled, then toppled hard onto its side. Lifting the unwieldy sword above her head, she walked on her knees toward the fallen

demon. The creature lifted its head and gave a gurgling wail; a wash of frothy blood erupted from its maw. Its four legs dug feebly at the ground as it tried in vain to rise and flee.

Yoko brought the sword down with both arms, letting the weight of the blade carry it deep into the monster's neck. The sword shone slick with blood, and the creature heaved, its four limbs twitching in a dying spasm, the claws fully extended.

Again the beast gurgled. For a moment, Yoko had the strange impression that it was trying to say something.

Who cares what it has to say.

Mustering the last ounce of her strength, Yoko lifted the sword again and swung at the black-furred neck once more. This time the beast didn't even twitch.

Yoko made sure the sword had cut clean through the demon's neck before she finally released her grip. Then she dropped to the ground and lay on her back, staring up at the cloudy twilight sky. After a while she tried taking a deep breath, and the side of her chest burned as though it had been set on fire. With each succeeding breath she felt as if her throat would split. Her arms and legs were so completely numb they might as well have been cut off for all the good they did her.

She wanted to take the gem in her hands, but she couldn't even move her fingers. So she sat, trying to stave off the dizziness that made the ground roll beneath her like a ship in a rough sea. The clouds streamed across the darkened sky, the wan blush of the setting sun painting their edges crimson.

Suddenly, violent nausea gripped her. She rolled onto her side and began to vomit. Foul-smelling juices from her empty stomach ran down her cheek. She breathed raggedly, choking on the vile acidity.

I survived.

Somehow, she had defeated death again.

I survived!

Still coughing, she repeated those words in her head until her breathing had grown steady. Then she heard a faint noise.

It was the sound of footsteps approaching. She lifted her head, fearing some new enemy's arrival; but even that motion, now, was too much for her ravaged body. The world spun around her and everything went black. The last thing she felt was the side of her head hitting the ground.

I can't move.

Awareness came rushing back to Yoko in a dizzying wave. An image danced in her mind, something she had seen the second before she blacked out. The color of gold.

"Keiki!" she shouted, one cheek resting on the ground. "Keiki!"

It was you. You sent the demons.

"Tell me why!"

She heard footsteps approaching. Carefully, Yoko raised her head, rolling her leaden eyes painfully upward to see the hem of a beautiful kimono. Her eyes rolled farther up until she was looking at long, flowing golden hair.

"Why . . . ?" Yoko's voice trailed off. The face—it wasn't Keiki. Yoko moaned. It wasn't even a man.

A woman with golden hair like Keiki's stood looking down at her. Yoko forced her eyes to stay open and stared back. "Who are you?"

She was beautiful. Yoko thought she must be about ten years older than herself. For some reason, she looked sad. In fact, she seemed on the verge of tears. Then a bright patch of color caught Yoko's eye: There, on one of the woman's slender shoulders, perched an enormous parrot with the most brilliant plumage she had ever seen.

"Who . . . ?" Yoko asked in a hoarse whisper, but the woman merely stood there, staring at her and saying nothing. A teardrop slid silently from her clear eye.

What?

The woman blinked slowly, sending translucent tears rolling down her cheeks. Yoko was stunned. She watched uncomprehendingly as the woman turned away from her to examine the body of the large dog-demon that lay on the ground nearby. Her expression seemed pained, as though she had known the creature, had even been fond of it. She took another step toward it and went down on her knees before the corpse.

Yoko could only stare. Even if she had wanted to move, she could not have. She was completely numb, unable to wiggle even a finger.

Gently, the woman reached out a hand and touched the fallen beast. Something red flared on her fingertip, and she pulled back her hand as though she had touched something hot and been burned.

"Who are you?" Yoko rasped.

The woman did not answer. She reached out her hand again, and this time she grabbed the hilt of the sword that was stuck in the beast and pulled it out. She placed the sword upon the ground and cradled the beast's head on her lap.

"Did . . . Did you send that creature to kill me?"

The woman silently stroked the hair of the dead beast. Blood and grime stained her expensive-looking kimono.

"And the other demons. Did you send them, too? Why? What have I done to make you hate me so?"

The woman shook her head, still holding the beast in her lap. Yoko furrowed her brows, and the parrot on the woman's shoulder flapped its wings.

"Kill her."

Yoko's eyes darted up to the bird. It was without a doubt the parrot that had spoken. The woman turned her head to look at the bird on her shoulder.

"Finish it."

For the first time, the strange woman spoke. "I cannot."

"Kill her. End her life."

"Forgive me! That alone I cannot do!" the woman exclaimed, shaking her head violently.

"I order it."

"I cannot!"

The parrot flapped its wings and rose into the air. It turned around once and landed on the ground.

"Then take her sword."

"The sword belongs to her. It will do me no good." There was sorrow in the woman's voice.



"Then cut off her arms!" screamed the parrot, beating its wings on the ground. "This, at least, you can do. Cut off her arms, so she may not wield the sword again."

"I cannot use that sword."

"Then use this."

The parrot opened its beak wide, and from deep in its throat, behind its darting, round tongue, something black and shiny appeared. Yoko's eyes went wide. The parrot was slowly vomiting something out of its mouth, something impossibly long. A full minute later the object dropped onto the ground: a sword in a black scabbard, slick with mucus from the parrot's gullet.

"Take it."

"Please, do not force me to do this," the woman pleaded, a look of desperation on her face. The parrot flapped its wings impatiently.

"Do it!"

The woman shielded her face as though physically struck by the voice.

Yoko struggled. She had to get up, to escape. Yet it was all she could do to dig at the ground with her fingertips.

The woman turned to Yoko with tear-stained cheeks.

"Please, stop." Yoko's voice was so hoarse she could barely hear it herself.

The woman picked up the black sword the parrot had vomited on the ground. With hands drenched in the demon's blood, she drew the sword from its scabbard.

"Who . . . who are you? Please . . . stop."

Who, or what, is that parrot? And the demon? What is going on here?

The woman moved her lips almost imperceptibly. Yoko thought she could make out two faint words: "Forgive me."

"Please . . . don't."

The woman directed the point of the blade toward Yoko's right hand, still clawing fruitlessly at the dirt. The blade wavered. The woman looked ready to collapse, though Yoko could not imagine why; she had no apparent injuries.

The parrot flew over and lit on Yoko's arm. Its claws dug into her skin. The weight was immense, as if a boulder had been placed on her arm. She wanted to brush him off, but her arm was pinned to the ground.

The parrot screamed, "Do it!"

The woman lifted up the sword.

"No!" Yoko strained at the parrot's weight, but she was too slow. The sword came down with a flash of light.

There was no pain, just a dull shock.

Is this the moment I meet my fate?

The pain had still not struck when Yoko let her consciousness give way.

Burning pain dragged Yoko back to reality. She lifted her eyes and looked over at her hand. The sword was standing vertical, stuck through her palm and driven deep into the ground below.

For a while, she just stared at it, uncomprehending. She looked up at the cloudy sky, then down at the blade standing straight as a lightning rod. Moments later, the pain brought her screaming back to full awareness.

The slender blade had gone completely through her hand. Pain from the wound rolled up her arm in waves, riding up her shoulder and smashing into her head.

She tried to move her arm, but stopped immediately when the wrenching agony made her gasp. It took her several moments to regain her composure.

Then, taking care not to move the hand that was pinned, she sat up, fending off the hurt and dizziness. Trembling, she reached out her left hand and grabbed the sword's hilt. Closing her eyes and gritting her teeth, she pulled. Pain shot through her, making her whole body convulse.

The sword was free. She threw it aside and, clutching her wounded hand, she writhed on the ground next to the fallen demon-dog and screamed until her voice faded to a weeping rasp. The pain made her violently nauseous.

At last, on the edge of delirium, she searched the breast pocket of her ragged shirt for the gem. Once she found it, she clutched it tightly. Then she placed it on her right hand. Grinding her teeth, she jammed the gem into her wounded palm and curled up in a ball on the ground.

The miracle of the gem saved Yoko again. The pain receded almost immediately. She lay there a while, catching her breath, then sat up once again. She gazed around, but saw no sign of the woman or the parrot. Still pressing the gem to the wound, she

tried moving the fingers of her right hand, but she could feel nothing from the wrist down. For a while, she sat there, using her left hand to squeeze the fingers of her right around the gem. She felt a cold blackness creeping up her spine, and slowly everything went dark.

Yoko's eyes fluttered open and looked up at a darkened sky. At one horizon, the clouds were still painted the color of twilight. She had only been unconscious a short while.

Who was the golden-haired woman? Why had she stabbed Yoko? She couldn't think of any possible explanation for what had happened—another mystery to add to the already long list. Yoko was sick of mysteries. Still lying on the ground, she groped around for her own sword, and when she found it she clutched it to her chest, cradling her wounded right hand, and lay still.

A few minutes had passed when she heard a voice.

"Huh?"

A small child was standing near her on a path—a girl, who turned and called out for her mother. A woman came running up, stopping when she saw Yoko lying there in the mud.

Yoko stared at the child's face. It seemed like a lifetime since she had seen something so *innocent.* The mother, too, looked benevolent—honest. She carried a large basket on her back and her clothes were very poor, made of rough-woven cloth with mud dyes.

The two approached Yoko, concern in their eyes. As one, they grimaced when they reached the body of the fallen demon-

dog. Yoko couldn't move. She merely sat watching as they came closer.

For the briefest of moments, she felt hope. At last she had been saved. But then a dark cloud passed over her face and unease rose in her breast—it was too perfect. Here she was, completely spent. She might possibly never walk again. The gem had cured some of the burning pain in her hand, but not entirely. If something attacked her, she was finished—and night with all its demons was fast approaching. What luck that she would be found by two kind-seeming travelers.

The same kind of luck that brought me to Takkee's house, she thought. *The same kind of luck that led me to Seizo. The same kind of luck that took me to this world in the first place. Bad luck.*

"What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Yoko felt the child's small hand touch her cheek. The mother bent down and lifted Yoko up into her arms. The sensation of warmth through her clothing made her feel ill.

"What happened to you?" the mother inquired. "Were you attacked? Are you wounded?" Her eyes found Yoko's right hand and she gave a soft scream. "What? Wait . . ."

The woman thrust a hand into the sleeve of her kimono and pulled out a thin cloth like a handkerchief, which she proceeded to wrap around Yoko's right hand. The child set down the small bag she was carrying, and reaching into it she pulled out a bamboo tube. She offered it to Yoko.

"Hey mister, want some water?"

Yoko hesitated. *The child was carrying it in her bag—it must be her own water. She wouldn't poison her own water.*

Yoko watched carefully to make sure the girl put nothing in the bamboo tube as she held it out. Convinced, Yoko nodded, and the small hands pulled out a cork and put the mouth of the tube to Yoko's lips. Lukewarm water ran down her throat, and suddenly her breathing became much easier.

"You . . . haven't been eating, have you?" said the mother.

Yoko didn't feel hungry, but she knew that she must be starving. She nodded faintly.

"How long has it been?"

Yoko said nothing. It took too much effort to try to count the days.

"Mama, I have some fried bread."

"No, no, that won't do. She won't be able to eat that. Give us some candy."

"Okay."

The child began rummaging through the bundle her mother had set down. It was a large wicker basket frame crammed with pots of various sizes. Yoko had seen people carrying similar bundles many times on the road. The child pulled out a stick with something that looked like rock candy on it. *Sugar peddlers.*

"That'll do," the woman said, nodding.

Without hesitating this time, Yoko reached out her left hand and took the candy. It was so sweet it stung her mouth.

"Are you traveling? What happened here?"

Yoko didn't answer. She couldn't tell the truth, and she hadn't the strength to think of a lie.

"If you were attacked by demons—" The woman looked at the carnage around her. "Well, you're lucky to be alive. Can you

stand? The sun is going down soon. But it's only a short way from here to the village at the foot of the mountain. Can you walk that far?"

Yoko shook her head. She had meant it to mean that she did not want to go to the village, but the woman assumed she meant she couldn't move. She turned around to the child. "Kuyo, run down to the village and call someone. Fast as you can! Night's coming."

"Yes, Mama."

"No . . ." muttered Yoko, sitting up. She looked at the stunned pair. "Thank you," she croaked, staggering to her feet with a heroic effort. It was all she could do to put one foot in front of the other. Yoko wobbled across the path to the other side, where the slope of the mountainside went up steeply.

"Wait. Where do you think you're going?" the mother called out.

Yoko had no idea. She didn't answer.

"The sun is going down. If you go into the mountains, you'll die."

Yoko crossed the path slowly. Every step sent jolts of pain up her legs and through her right hand.

"Come with us to the village."

The slope upward was very steep, and Yoko realized it would be bone-breaking work to climb, especially without the use of one hand.

"We are merchants. We trade down in Bakurou. We're not bandits. At least, come down to the village. Please."

Yoko reached down and grabbed a stick lying on the road.

"Wait!"

"No need to shout," Yoko said, turning to look at the woman who stood there, an odd expression on her face. "Leave me be. Or is there some reason why you *want* me to come with you to the village?"

"What are you saying? What reason do we need, other than that you're wounded and the sun is going down!"

"I know. You should hurry back. You have a small child."

"Wait . . ."

"I'm fine out here. I'm used to it. Thank you for the candy."

The woman gave Yoko a perplexed look that might have been kindness thwarted or might have been something else. Yoko had no idea which it was, and she had no intention of finding out.

Exerting herself, she scrambled awkwardly up the first few feet of the steep slope; she had just paused to regain her breath when she heard the child calling to her from below. She looked down to see the young girl standing with arms outstretched. In one hand she held the water canteen, and in the other a simple oven-fired mug. The mug was filled with candy.

"Take it. You don't look like you have much."

"But, I . . ."

"Please. Kuyo, come."

The child stretched up to the limit of her height and placed the canteen and the candy at Yoko's feet. Then she turned and ran back to her mother who was standing with their bags.

Yoko watched as mother and child put their loads on their backs. She couldn't bring herself to say anything, not even to thank them, and so she stood there in a daze, watching the pair turn away and walk back down the hill toward the village.

When she could no longer see them, Yoko stooped down and picked up the tube and the mug. She felt the strength go out of her legs, and her knees struck the ground.

I did the right thing. I'm sure of it.

She had no guarantee that those people were inviting her to the village out of goodwill. They might change as soon as they stepped through the gates. And even if they didn't intend her harm, as soon as it became known that Yoko was the escaped kaikyaku, the village folk would send her to the officials for sure. It hurt, but she had to be cautious. She couldn't trust anyone, couldn't dare to hope. The moment she let down her guard, she would be stung for it.

"Maybe they were really going to help you, hrmm?" asked a familiar grating voice. Yoko answered without looking around.

"Could have been a trap."

"Could have been your only chance. You think help will come twice, out here?"

"What if it wasn't help at all?"

"You have a choice? With that hand and those wounds . . . I think not, hrmm?"

"I'll make it."

"Aw, you should have gone with them."

"I'll be fine."

"You'll be dead! You just threw away your first and last chance for help, dear girlie. So sad, so sad."

"Shut up!"

She swung around, sword cutting through the twilit air, but the monkey was nowhere to be seen. The only sign of his

presence was the familiar cackling laugh, disappearing above her in the underbrush of the mountainside.

Yoko glanced back the way she had come. Black spots were appearing on the road, barely visible in the gloom. She held out her unwounded hand and felt a wet drop on the palm. It was beginning to rain.

That night was the hardest she had ever known.

Her strength was spent. The cold rain robbed her body of what little warmth remained to it. Her clothes stuck to her skin, hampering her movements. Her drooping limbs refused to move. Some feeling had come back to her right hand, but she could not grip anything—let alone wield a sword. Besides, the hilt of the sword was slick with rain. It was a night to send any human running for shelter—but the demons reveled in it. The gloom was cavern-dark, concealing their shapes, yet they came, toothy and gibbering, small in size but great in number.

Yoko lurched through muddy gullies, wallowing in the gore of her enemies and dripping blood from her own wounds until the rain washed it all away, along with the rest of her strength. Her sword was heavy in her left hand, and Joyu's impulses seemed faint and distant, if he was there at all. Every time a demon came, she felt the blade dip lower as she fought, until she feared she would not be able to raise it again.

She looked up at the sky as if in prayer, begging for morning to come. The nights she had spent in flight before always

seemed short, but tonight, with its endless stream of enemies, was inconceivably, horribly long. Again and again she dropped her sword, picking it up even as demons clawed at her skin. Finally, when the horizon was just hinting at dawn's arrival, she found one of the white trees.

Yoko rolled underneath the branches, catching one of the hard twigs in her side. Lying low, she caught her breath. For a long time she could sense the demons pacing at a distance, circling, until finally they disappeared into the rain and were gone.

The sky lightened gradually, and she could see the tangled canopy of the tree hanging low over her head.

"Saved . . ."

Yoko breathed. Her shoulders heaved with exertion, and drops of rain fell into her open mouth.

Her wounds were throbbing, contaminated with mud, but that hardly bothered her now. For a while she lay on her side, gasping in the damp air, waiting for the patches of sky she could see through the white branches to grow lighter. When at last her lungs stopped laboring, she found she was horribly cold. The white tree was protection from the larger predators, but it did little to stop the rain. She knew she would have to crawl out and find some shelter, but her body refused to move.

She grasped the gem, trying to draw power from it; the strange energy warmed the tips of her fingers. With great effort she managed to roll over, and crawling out from underneath the branches of the tree, she began to move down the slope on all

fours. The wet grass and earth made it fairly easy to crawl as long as she was going downhill.

She wanted to avoid the roads, but after last night's chase through the darkness she had no idea how deep into the mountains she had gone.

With the gem in one hand, and her sword as a staff in the other, she stood. The pain from her wounds was acute, almost overwhelming. With each step she took, her knees buckled, until she couldn't bear it any more and dropped down into a crouch. Half crawling, she made it to the bottom of the slope where she found a path. It was little more than an animal run, and certainly not a proper road—there were no wheel ruts, nor was it even wide enough for a buggy to pass. As soon as she reached it she knew: this was her end. She went down on her knees, clawing at the bark of a nearby tree in a last effort to support herself, but her weakened hands were not up to the task. She fell headfirst into the muddy path and did not move.

Yoko still held the gem firmly in her injured hand, but the faint warmth that came pulsing from it did little to soothe her. Whatever strength the gem gave her was outmatched by what the cold rain sapped away. The miracle of the gem had reached its limit.

So. I will die here.

Yoko smiled. She would probably be the only one of her classmates to die of exposure.

Her classmates—they were people of a different world. They would always have homes waiting for them, families to protect them, and a guaranteed future free from starvation and want.

She had done all she could. She didn't want to give up, yet struggle as she might, she could barely raise a finger. Then again, she thought, if her reward for reaching her personal limit was an easy death, then maybe it had all been worth it.

After a while, she heard a high, clear ringing mingling with the sound of the falling rain. When she lifted her eyes, the sword near her cheek was glowing with a pallid light. She couldn't see the side of the blade from where she lay on the ground, her cheek pressed into the mud, yet she saw faint forms in the spray of the rainwater that was bouncing off the polished steel.

"Nakajima?"

A man's voice—it was her homeroom teacher. She couldn't tell where he was.

"Nakajima was a bright girl, one of my best students. Couldn't hope for less trouble from a student, really."

He was talking to someone. She could hear the other speaker—a thick, older male voice.

"Were there any signs that she might be associating with the wrong crowd?"

"Not that I know of."

"Not that you know of?"

Her teacher shrugged. *"She was an exceptional student, top of her class. I never worried much about how she was spending her free time. Last girl you'd expect to get into trouble, really."*

"A strange man came into the school, is that correct?"

"That's true, but . . . at the time, it seemed like Nakajima had never met him before. I'm not sure what was really going on. Still, I did have some doubts."

"Doubts?"

Her teacher's face twisted in a wry smile. *"Maybe that's not the right word. I'm . . . not sure how to say this. You see, Nakajima was an exceptional student. She got along well with the other girls in her class. It sounds as if she got along well with her parents, too. But, you know, that's just not possible."*

"Oh?"

"I'm not sure I should be saying this, but we teachers . . . well, we each have our own ideal of what our students should be, right? Their friends are the same way. And parents, well, they have things they want for their children, too. Every one of us has this agenda, this notion of what a given person should be like, and we just push it on them whether it fits or not. Now, it's unlikely that all of us have the same ideal in mind for any particular student. Why, if teachers and parents had their way, the student would be miserable. Take Nakajima. She was a 'good girl' to everybody, right?"

The other man nodded.

"Well, if you ask me, she was just showing each of us the face we wanted to see. What I think is that if Nakajima was getting along with everybody so well, she wasn't specializing in anyone, you understand? She wasn't cultivating any real connections with anybody."

"Even with you?"

Her teacher's face took on a bitter expression. *"To be brutally honest, I prefer the students that cause a little bit of trouble—you know, demand a little attention. I always thought Nakajima was a good girl, but when she graduated, heck, I would've forgotten her. We all would have. I probably wouldn't have remembered her if she came to her tenth reunion."*

"I see . . ."

"I don't know whether Nakajima was doing it on purpose, or whether she was just trying to be a good girl and that's how it happened. If it was an act, then I have no idea what she was doing behind our backs. If it wasn't, why, I think she'd be horribly sad when she realized the truth. She would wonder exactly who she was. She might even want to disappear. Now, that wouldn't surprise me at all."

Yoko stared at the rainy image of her homeroom teacher, dumbfounded. The image gradually faded, and a small girl appeared in its place. It was a student with whom Yoko had gotten along rather well.

"I heard that you were friends with Nakajima?" the older voice asked.

The girl looked frightened. *"Not really. We weren't like buddies or anything."*

"Really?"

"Oh, well, we talked a bit at school. It's not like we met after school or anything, or, like, called each other at home. Well, maybe once or twice, but that's just, like, being a classmate, you know?"

"I see."

"So I really don't know anything about her, okay? We just talked about normal everyday things in class."

"Did you not like her?"

"No—I didn't hate her or anything. I didn't think she was anything special, either. I guess I was always just kind of being social, you know? It wasn't like she was really interesting or anything."

"Hmm . . ."

The next girl wasn't so kind:

"Nakajima? Oh, she was a total two-face."

"Two-face?"

"Yes. Like, when we'd be picking on somebody? She'd just nod and go along with it. She'd say 'Oh yes, totally' like that. But then when the other girl would say something bad about us, she'd just nod along with her, too. She had a pretty face for everyone—that's why I couldn't stand her . . .

"Friends? Us? Not likely. Oh, she was good for, like, commiserating about homework and stuff. She was a good listener just 'cause she'd nod at whatever you said. That's it."

"I see . . ."

"That's why she ran away from home, I bet. She was hanging out with weird people behind our backs, talking stuff about her classmates and the teachers. I wouldn't be surprised at all. I mean, isn't that classic? The good little girl with a dark secret."

"So, there's a possibility that she was involved in some sort of incident?"

"Well maybe she got into a fight with the people she was seeing secretly. Anyway, it has nothing to do with me."

Another girl went even further:

"Honestly? I'm glad she's gone."

"You were picked on in class, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"And Nakajima picked on you too?"

"Uh-huh. She would ignore me along with the rest of them, all the while pretending like she was a good little girl."

"Oh?"

"The other girls would say really nasty things about me, right? And Nakajima, she'd just sit there, joining in, but not really. It was like she

didn't really want to pick on me, but she still went along with the class because she didn't want them to hate her. I'd rather she just went all out, you know? It's cowardly."

"I think I understand."

"There she is, the good little girl, looking at me with pity. But she didn't stop them. Made me even madder."

"I can see that."

"Look, whether she left home or was abducted or something, it's got nothing to do with me. Whatever happened to her, between us, I was the victim. I've got no . . . no sympathy for her. I only hope I don't end up like she was. You can suspect me, if you want. I didn't like her, I'm glad she's gone, and I'm not gonna lie about it. It's the truth."

It was her mother who rose to her defense. She was sitting in a chair, bent over, looking crumpled.

"She was a good girl. Not the kind to run away from a home. Not the kind to hang out with the wrong crowd."

"Yes, but it seems that Yoko wasn't happy at home?"

Her mother's eyes opened wide. *"Yoko? I don't see why not."*

"I hear that she complained quite a bit to her classmates. About her parents being strict?" said the man.

"Oh, I suppose we scolded her sometimes, but that's our job as parents, isn't it? No, I don't believe it. She never seemed unhappy, not in the least."

"So, you can't think of any reason why she would have run away?"

"None at all. It's just not something she would've done."

"What about the man who came to school looking for her?"

"I know nothing about that. She wasn't the type to hang out with strangers or, or . . . weirdos."

"So, then, why do you think she went missing?"

"Maybe, on the way home from school, someone—"

"I'm sorry, but we've no evidence of that. Yoko left the teachers' room with that man and wasn't seen after that. Apparently, he wasn't forcing her to follow, either. Some of the teachers say she acted as though she knew him."

Her mother's head was hanging down, listening.

"Apparently, Yoko said that she didn't know him, but I think that perhaps even if they had never met before, they were connected in some way. Perhaps they had a friend in common? We're looking into it."

"Did . . . did Yoko really complain about her life at home?"

"Apparently so, yes."

Her mother covered her face in her hands. *"She didn't seem unhappy. She didn't seem the type to run away from home, or run around with the wrong crowd behind our backs. Really. She wasn't the sort to involve her family in a tragedy."*

"Well, children are known for not showing their real selves to their parents."

"Why, I remember hearing other families talk about their children and thinking what a good girl Yoko was. Maybe I should've suspected something?"

"Yes, well, our children rarely grow up the way we want them to be. My kid is a regular hell-raiser."

"It's true, isn't it . . . She seemed so good; she did her parents proud. I guess . . . we may have been fooled. Maybe we were wrong to trust her so blindly."

Yoko blinked. *No . . . Mom . . .*

Yoko wanted to cry, but the tears didn't come. She mouthed the words "No, that's wrong" over and over again, but she couldn't make a sound. The image faded.

Yoko lay in a large puddle of rainwater, her face half sunk in the mud, lacking the strength to rise. No one from her former life could have guessed where she was now, not in their wildest dreams. *That's why they could say those things.* Because they didn't know.

Tossed into this strange brutal world, starving, alone, wounded, unable even to stand . . . Yet still she feebly ground her teeth and wished more than anything to go home.

Home?

What exactly does that mean?

Slowly the truth seemed to come into focus. All she had in that other world were people—people like the ones she had seen in the sword.

Home?

No one was waiting for her there. She had nothing, and no one understood her. Lies. Betrayal. As far as she was concerned, this world and the other had much in common.

I've known that all along.

But . . . I want to go home.

She laughed, silently, ironically. She wanted to laugh out loud but her face, frozen by the rain, would not smile. She wanted to cry, too, but no tears were left.

Enough.

She'd had enough—enough of everything. Yoko lay down and waited for it all to end.

CHAPTER FIVE

The rain fell endlessly, like thin silken threads cast streaming from the sky.

Yoko was lying on her side, cheek in a puddle, unable to get up—unable even to cry—when she heard a rustling in the underbrush behind her. Her instincts screamed at her to seek cover, but she could barely raise her head to see what was coming.

A villager? A wild animal? A demon?

Of course, she thought, no matter what it was, the end result would be the same. Whether she was captured, attacked, or simply left to lie here in the mud, she would wind up in the same place.

Dead.

What eventually shuffled into her dimming vision was none of these things. It wasn't even a person. It was a peculiar creature the likes of which she'd never seen before.

It looked something like a rat. It balanced on two hind legs, as some rodents do, and brushed its whiskers just like a rat. In fact, the only thing about it that was decidedly un-ratlike was that standing on its hind legs, it was about as tall as a human child. So, it was not a common wild animal, but it was no demon, either. Yoko had encountered enough of those to tell the difference.

It wore a large leaf on its head like an umbrella to keep off the rain, which beaded in little silver droplets on the almost transparent green—beautifully, Yoko noted absently.

The rat stood there, staring at her and seeming rather startled, though not unduly alarmed. It was a little chubbier than the rats she'd seen back home. Its fur was a color somewhere between brown and gray, and it seemed very thick—fluffy, even. Yoko thought it would be quite nice to touch, actually. The water droplets that clung to it looked like beads. The creature was covered in hair all the way down, even its tail, which was a good thing, Yoko thought, for there were few things she found more revolting than naked rat tails.

The rat-thing brushed its whiskers several times, and then, walking on its hind legs, it shuffled over toward Yoko. It leaned over her, peering down. A small paw touched her shoulder.

"You all right?"

Yoko blinked. The voice sounded like a child's, yet it was coming, without a doubt, from the rat-thing standing above her. The creature tilted its head, a strange expression on its face. "What's the matter? Can't move?"

Mustering what little strength remained, Yoko craned her neck to look directly into the creature's face. She nodded. Somehow, the fact that this thing wasn't a human being made her feel more at ease.

The rat sighed and held out a small, childlike paw. "Pluck up. Me house is just around thataways."

Yoko sighed in return, though she wasn't sure whether hers was a sigh of relief or of hopelessness.

She tried to grab the creature's outstretched paw, but only the tips of her fingers twitched. The rat reached out—small, warm fingers wrapped around Yoko's icy cold hand.

Supported by the surprisingly strong rodent, Yoko allowed herself to be brought, staggering, to a small house among the trees. She remembered a door opening, and walking through it, and then everything faded.

In the long hours that followed, her awareness drifted in and out, and she saw many things, but her mind could make no sense of anything. She didn't know where she was, or if anyone was there with her, or if she would ever get up again. She went through fits of deep sleep alternating with light fevered dreams, and when she awoke at last she was inside a simple house, lying on a low, rustic bed.

She looked up in a daze at the ceiling for a while and then sat bolt upright. Leaping from the bed, she landed on a wooden floor and immediately collapsed. Her legs were completely useless.

There was apparently no one else in the small room. Dizzily Yoko peered around, then crawled over to check the far side of the bed, but she found no obvious threat. There was a small table and a simple shelf that was little more than a few boards stuck together with some folded cloth on it; atop that, her sword and the blue gem were neatly laid out.

Yoko breathed a sigh of relief. After rubbing her legs to stimulate the circulation, she eventually managed to stand and reach the low shelf. She put the gem around her neck, picked up the sword and the cloth that had been serving as a makeshift

scabbard, and fell back on the bed. Wrapping the sword, she pulled it under the blanket with her. Now she could relax.

For the first time, Yoko realized she was wearing pajamas—someone had changed her out of her tattered rags.

Her wounds, too, had been treated. She felt something damp under her shoulder and reached around to find a wet cloth. It had to have fallen off her forehead when she sat up. She put it back on and the cool fabric felt good against her skin. Pulling the thick blanket up to her neck, she grasped onto the gem tightly, closed her eyes, and breathed another deep sigh of relief. Though her life might be worth little at the moment, she reflected, she was still glad she had been saved.

"Ah, you're awake."

Yoko shot up in bed, turning to see who had spoken, and discovered the large rat-creature with grayish hair stepping into the room. It held a tray in one hand and a small wooden pail in the other.

Alarms went off in Yoko's head. If it lived like a human and talked like a human, even its kind appearance was no guarantee that it meant well.

The rat approached with a casual waddle, seeming completely oblivious to Yoko's suspicious glare. It set the tray down on a table and placed the bucket at the foot of the bed.

"Your fever?"

A small furry paw reached out. Yoko flinched and pulled away. Drawing back, the rat stroked its whiskers, then reached down to pick up the cloth that had once again fallen from Yoko's forehead. If it noticed the wrapped bundle that the girl

clutched to her chest, the creature said nothing. Throwing the cloth into the bucket, the rat looked into Yoko's eyes.

"How d'you feel? Can you eat?"

Yoko shook her head. The rat stroked its whiskers again, and picked up a mug from the table. "Medicine. Can you drink?"

Yoko shook her head again. She was determined to be cautious; she couldn't put herself in danger again. The rat gave her a quizzical look, then put the mug to its own mouth. While she watched, it sipped at the liquid. "Just medicine. A little bitter, but nothing undrinkable. Well?"

The rat held out the mug again, but still Yoko refused to take it. The rat frowned and scratched beneath one ear. "I s'pose your fever is mostly gone anyway. What will you eat, then? Got to eat and drink or you'll wither away. How 'bout some tea? Goat's milk? Maybe some porridge?"

Yoko didn't respond, and the rat sniffed perplexedly. "You slept for three days. If I wanted to hurt you, I'd have done it then, eh?" The creature poked its nose toward the wrapped bundle in Yoko's arms. "And you've got your sword hidden there. Maybe you don't trust us?"

Yoko looked into the beady black eyes that met her own, and finally released her clutch on the sword, setting it down on the bed alongside her outstretched legs.

"Right!" the rat said with a satisfied look. He—Yoko decided it was a "he"—reached out a paw, and Yoko did not flinch this time. The small palm touched her forehead briefly.

"A bit warm still, but much better. You need sleep. Is there anything you want?"

Yoko paused, then in a faint voice croaked, "Water."

The rat's ears twitched. "Water! Very good—you can speak. I'll go fetch some water, then. And if you're going to sit up, keep that blanket on you."

Yoko nodded, but the rat was already turning to leave the room, his short-furred tail swaying behind him. He soon returned with a jug of water, a mug, and a small bowl. The water had been boiled and was still a bit warm. It was delicious. Yoko drank several mugfuls and then looked into the bowl. It held a pinkish-orange concoction that smelled strongly of alcohol.

"What . . . what is this?"

"Peaches! Pickled in wine 'n' simmered in sugar. Surely you can eat these."

Yoko nodded and looked up at the rat. "Thank you."

The rat gave his whiskers a long stroke. The fur on his cheeks puffed out, and his eyes narrowed. He was smiling.

"Me name's Rakushun. You?"

Yoko hesitated before answering. "Yoko."

"Yoko? How d'you write that?"

Yoko had to work to keep her mouth from dropping open in surprise. *I suppose I shouldn't be surprised,* she thought. *If it speaks, why shouldn't it write?* "Well, the *yo* is the character for *sun*, and the *ko* is the character for *child*," she explained, gesturing:

陽子

"Sun-Child, eh?" Rakushun tilted his head to one side, quizzically, then grinned. "Funny name, that. Where you from?"

Yoko felt she should give him some answer, and so, hesitantly, she said, "Kei. The kingdom of Kei."



"Kei? What part of Kei?"

Of course, Yoko didn't know any places in Kei, so she said the first word that came to mind. "Hairou."

"Eh? Where's that?" Rakushun scratched under an ear, perplexed once more. "I suppose it doesn't really matter. You get some sleep. Can you drink the medicine?"

This time, Yoko nodded. "Say, how do you write Rakushun?"

"Like me! *Happy* . . . and *swift!*" He gestured:

楽俊

"At your service!" The rat smiled and took a bow.

Yoko slept away the rest of the day, occasionally waking to find Rakushun moving about nearby, bringing her medicine or cleaning. She came to realize that the rat-creature lived alone.

"So it's got a tail. That makes it all right, hrmm?"

It was the middle of the night. The blue monkey's head was peering over the foot of Yoko's bed. "You'll only be betrayed again!"

She gazed around unhappily. Rakushun was not there. There were two beds in the room, but he didn't sleep here—though Yoko doubted there were any other bedrooms in the house.

"Shouldn't you be leaving? Best to creep away, lest you draw your last breath under this roof, hrmm?"

Yoko didn't reply. She sat there, silently, letting the monkey's voice rattle on. *I'm on to you, ape!* He was the embodiment of the

worries that lurked in the back of her mind; that monkey shape was only there to give her fears a voice, to feed on her growing unease.

She heard a faint rustling sound, and the blue monkey clambered atop the comforter, crawling up to the head of the bed to rest by her pillow. His small, sneering face looked into Yoko's eyes. "Strike first before something happens! Strike first, strike fast. Only way to survive, hrmm?"

Yoko turned onto her back and looked up at the ceiling. "Who says I trust Rakushun?"

"Oh?"

"I can't move. What else am I supposed to do? I have to stay here, at least until I can wield my sword again. It's either that or become a snack for the demons." The wound in her right hand was deep. She had held the gem for a whole day since awaking in this place, yet she still lacked the strength to grip it tightly.

"But what if he's realized that you're a kaikyaku? Oh, and you lie here so carelessly. Why, the magistrate could be knocking on the door at any moment."

"Then I'll let my sword speak for me. I'm sure I can handle four or five officials. In the meantime, I'll . . . *use* the rat."

I have no friends here.

But she had never needed help so badly. At least until she could wield her sword, until her strengh returned, she would have to remain in this place. She needed rest, and food, and medicine.

Yoko didn't know whether Rakushun was an enemy or a friend, but right now, it didn't matter—the creature was

providing her with what she needed. She was happy to let him provide for her until his true motives became clear.

"Sure there's no poison in your food? And that medicine . . . very suspicious, that."

"I'm being careful."

"Checked out all the angles, have you?"

The blue monkey kept on with his litany of dangers, voicing Yoko's own concerns. Answering him was like talking to herself, trying to defuse her own fears.

"If he really wanted to do something to me, he had plenty of opportunities when I was unconscious. He wouldn't have to put poison in my food now. He's had more than enough chances to kill me."

"Maybe he's waiting for something, hrmm? Reinforcements?"

"Then I'd best regain as much strength as I can."

"Perhaps he seeks to gain your trust, and then betray you!"

"Then I'll pretend I trust him until I see his true intentions."

The monkey suddenly cackled with fresh laughter. "Aren't you the tough one, hrmm?"

"I know, now. I know how the world is."

I have no friends. No destination, no way to go home. I am alone. Yet I must survive.

Somehow, having nothing made her life all the more valuable. If every living thing in this world wanted Yoko to die, she would live—if only just to throw it in their faces. If everything in the world she had been dragged away from didn't want her to come back, she would return.

I don't want to give up. I mustn't give up. I will live, find Keiki, and go back Over There. Even if he is my enemy, I'll make him take me back home.

"And why would you want to go home?"

"I'll worry about that once I'm there."

"Shouldn't you just die and get it over with?"

"If no one else cares whether I live or die, I'd better care all the more."

"The rat will betray you. You know this."

Yoko glared at the monkey. "How can he, if I don't trust him?"

She should've realized it sooner. Yoko was a kaikyaku. That's why she was hunted. Kaikyaku had no friends, no allies, and no place to go in this world. She knew this, and yet she had let Takkee and Matsuyama take her in so easily. Instead of trusting them and getting betrayed, she should have feigned trust and used them—used them all in order to survive.

Use what you can use. What's wrong with that?

Both Takkee and Matsuyama had been using Yoko to make some cash, so Yoko would use Rakushun for his healing. It was simple.

"I think we have the makings of a wonderful villain here, hrmm? You!"

"That's fine with me," muttered Yoko, waving her hand in the monkey's face like she might shoo away a bothersome fly. "I'm tired. Go away."

The monkey looked at her with a strange expression on his face, like he had swallowed something bitter. Then he

turned around and ducked under the edge of the bed cover, disappearing.

Yoko watched him go and smiled a wan smile.

Talking to the monkey was helping her sort out her feelings and concerns quite nicely.

I can use him, too.

"Villain!"

She heard a light, derisive chuckling coming from somewhere in the room.

Yoko didn't care. Better to be a villain than to be used once more by someone else. She wouldn't let anyone endanger her again. She would protect herself.

I was right to do what I did, back there.

Yoko recalled the woman and child she had met on the mountain path. They hadn't betrayed her, because she hadn't given them the chance.

I won't give Rakushun the chance either.

This was how she would survive.

There were still so many unanswered questions, and all seemed to imply threat or coercion. Why had Yoko been brought to this world? Why had Keiki called her his *master?* What did he mean by *enemies?* What did the enemies want? Why were they after Yoko? And that woman with Keiki's golden hair—who was she, and why had she attacked Yoko?

Demons attack people indiscriminately; they don't hunt particular *people.*

Then why do they always attack me? The golden-haired woman embraced the body of the black dog-demon as if she was grieving for it.

Was that thing her friend? Does she control demons, like Keiki commands the creatures that run with him? Did she send those hellhounds to attack me? When she spoke with the parrot she seemed reluctant, almost as if she had been following orders to attack . . . so who gave the orders? Was Keiki just following orders when he came after me in the first place?

She didn't understand a single thing, which angered her more than anything else. Somehow, she would find some answers.

Unconsciously, she made fists with her hands, her long nails digging into her palms. Raising her hands to look at her fingertips, Yoko saw that her broken, chipped nails had become tapered, sharp—the nails of a beast.

Only demons and wizards can cross the Void Sea.

Yoko wasn't a wizard or a god.

A demon, then?

She remembered the dream she'd had on the shore of the Void Sea, of turning into a red-furred beast. Had it really been just a dream?

Her other dream—the one she'd had every night before coming here—had come true. Did that mean the other dream would come true, too?

What if my hair turning red, and my eyes turning green, what if these were just steps toward becoming something else? Maybe I'm not human at all. Maybe I am *a demon.*

It was horribly frightening, and at the same time, oddly, it was almost fun.

She could shout, she could scream, she could brandish a glittering sword; she could make people cower before her. There was a certain kind of exhilaration in that. In the world

where she'd been born, Yoko had never raised her voice to anyone, never stared anyone down. In fact, she had always thought of that kind of behavior as somehow bad or wrong. Maybe she just hadn't known any better?

Maybe Yoko's own unconscious had known all along that she was a demon, a wild beast. It knew she couldn't live in her birth world and so it had lain low, awaiting its chance, pretending to be harmless and civilized for years . . .

That's why no one knew who I was. Really.

Yoko drifted off into a deep sleep.

Rakushun's house was quite simple, of a kind Yoko had often noticed in farming villages as she wandered through the countryside. While most of the buildings she had seen were poor, this was certainly among the poorest. Usually, farm houses were clustered together in small villages, but this house was oddly alone, standing by itself on a hillside. There were no other dwelling places in sight.

Yet although the house was poor, it wasn't particularly small—not much smaller than a normal, human house. It seemed out of scale with the diminutive size of her host. Not just the building, but all of the utensils and furniture seemed built to human size. *Very odd*, Yoko thought.

"Rakushun, where do your parents live?"

Since Yoko had recovered enough strength to walk, she had busied herself helping the rat-creature around the house. Right

now she was pouring water into an iron bowl that went into the bottom part of a large brick stove. Her right hand, supporting a bucket, was still wrapped in bandages, but the wound beneath had almost entirely closed.

Rakushun stopped throwing chopped firewood into the oven and looked up at Yoko. "Got no father. Me mother's gone off."

". . . On a trip? She hasn't been here since I came. Did she go far?"

"No, no. She went to a nearby town. Got a little work there. Thought she'd be back the day before yesterday, but seeing as she hasn't, I s'pose they found some other use for her."

So his mother might come home at any time.

"What does your mother do?"

"She's a maidservant during wintertime. In summer she works the fields like everyone else. Still, if she gets a call during the summer, she goes into town to do the chores."

"I see . . ."

"Were you on your way somewhere, Yoko?"

Yoko had to think about that one. She really hadn't been heading anywhere in particular. But she didn't care to admit that she had just been wandering aimlessly. She looked over at her host. "Do . . . do you know someone called Keiki?"

Rakushun brushed some wood chips off his fur. "Looking for somebody, eh? He from around here?"

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

"Hmm. I'm sorry to say, I've never heard of any Keiki."

"I didn't think you had." Yoko turned back to the oven. "Is there anything else I can do?"

"No, no, I didn't tend to your wounds just to work you to death. You should rest."

Yoko didn't need to be told twice. Finding a rickety old chair, she plopped down heavily, feeling the cool, earthen floor under her bare feet.

She glanced at the chair next to her, where she had set the sword in its cloth wrapping. Yoko never let it far from her side, and Rakushun never mentioned it.

"I was wondering . . ." The rat-creature addressed Yoko in his childlike voice, the glistening fur of his back still turned to her. "Why were you were dressed like a man?"

Yoko remembered that she had awoken from her unconscious delirium in clean nightclothes. She could imagine his surprise when he first removed her tattered peasant's garb.

"It's not safe on the road for a woman alone."

"Aye, that it isn't."

Rakushun sidled over, carrying a clay jug. The fragrant aroma of something freshly brewed filled the room. The rat put two mugs on the table and looked up at Yoko. "Next question. Why don't you have a scabbard for your sword there?"

"I lost it," replied Yoko. She had almost forgotten, but now the memories returned in a flood. When she crossed the Void Sea she had been told not to separate the sword from its scabbard. Still, it didn't seem like much had happened to her because of that loss. She was pretty sure what was meant was that she shouldn't let go of the gem; its value had been proven many times over.

Rakushun nodded and muttered to himself as he clambered onto a chair, looking just like a small furry child. "You should get yourself a new scabbard. 'Tis a fine sword you got there. Wouldn't want it to get all nicked up, eh?"

"Yes, I suppose I should," Yoko responded weakly.

Rakushun looked up at her with his jet-black eyes. He tilted his head quizzically. "You say you came from Hairou, yes?"

"That's right."

"You're not talking 'bout Kei, then, are you? Hairou's a village in the eastern part of Shin Prefecture, if I'm not mistaken."

That's right, thought Yoko, *that was the name of the town were I first arrived. Why did I say that?*

"Big shoku around there a little while back, wasn't there?"

Yoko didn't reply.

"Heard it threw up a kaikyaku. Heard they got away."

Yoko glared at Rakushun. Unconsciously her hand stretched out toward the sword on the chair next to her. "What are you saying?"

"Word is, the kaikyaku was a girl. Sixteeen or seventeen years old, hair of red. Oh, and she has a sword, too. No scabbard, though. You dyed your hair, didn't you, Yoko?"

Yoko grabbed the hilt of her sword, eyes fixed on Rakushun. She couldn't read anything in the rat's expression, which suddenly seemed inscrutably inhuman.

"We got word from the magistrate, see."

"And . . . ?"

"No need to look so frightened, there. If I was going to hand you over, I would've done it when the officials came knocking

the other day, eh? You got a pretty price on your head, you know."

Yoko unwrapped the sword and stood with the blade drawn and shining in the dim light of the room. "What do you want?"

The rat looked up at her, beady eyes twinkling, and stroked his silken whiskers. "You're a hasty one, aren't you?"

"Why did you protect me?"

Rakushun grinned and scratched under his ear. "What do I want? Well, it isn't really like that, now. See, once I found you, I couldn't rightly leave you there in the mud. So I took care of you. And then when the officials came knocking, well, I couldn't rightly just hand you over after going through all that trouble, now could I?"

Yoko didn't trust his words. *Trust too easily, and you'll only regret it.*

"A kaikyaku gets sent to the magistrate's. If you're lucky, they throw you in a cell to rot. Unlucky, they hang you by your neck. I figure you'd be the latter, frankly."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because they think you're dangerous. Demons attacked 'em when they tried to take you to the magistrates, no? Demons! But you escaped."

"Those demons . . . I had nothing to do with that."

"I didn't think so," the rat said, nodding. "Demons don't do the bidding of human folk that easily. No, I don't think you called 'em; I think they came after you. Am I wrong?"

"I . . . I don't know."

Rakushun sipped his tea. "Yep, I figure you're probably one of the so-called bad kaikyaku. 'Specially if you've got demons on your tail."

"So?"

"So, if you get sent to the magistrate, well nine straws out of ten'd be short, if you get my drift. I s'pose then the only thing for you to do is run, but if you don't know where to run to . . ."

Yoko sat silently.

"And you don't, do you? Not if you're wandering 'round a backwater like this. You've got to get yourself to the kingdom of En."

Yoko stared hard at Rakushun's face. The rat's expression remained impossible to read. At least, it was for Yoko. "Why? Why help me?"

"Could *you* stand by and watch someone get killed?" Rakushun demanded, smiling. "Mind you, I'm not the sort to associate with criminals, nor folks who've got a price on their head. But getting killed just because you're a kaikyaku . . . well, that seems different to me."

"But I'm a bad kaikyaku, right?"

"Sure, that's what the magistrate'll think. Meself, I don't see how there can be 'good' or 'bad' kaikyaku. Seems to me, people are just scared of what they don't know about."

"What about bad kaikyaku ruining the state?"

"Superstition."

The rat's quick and easy reply made Yoko all the more suspicious. She remembered someone else who had used that word *superstition.* A woman.

"So what then? If I go to this kingdom of En, will I be safe there?"

"I think so. The king of En, he don't hang kaikyaku like the others. The kaikyaku there, they live just like regular people. To me, that's proof there's no such thing as good kaikyaku and bad kaikyaku. And that's also why I think you should be heading over to En. And . . ." Rakushun glanced up at her sword. "Maybe you might think about putting that pointy thing away?"

Yoko hesitated a long time before putting down the sword.

"Sit! Tea's getting cold."

Yoko finally took a seat. She didn't understand what Rakushun was after. Now that he knew she was a kaikyaku, she felt she should leave as soon as she could; but first she wanted to know more about this kingdom of En.

"D'you know the lay of the land around here?"

Yoko shook her head. Rakushun nodded, then, gripping his mug, he slid off the chair and shuffled around to Yoko's side of the table. Yoko sat, hand on her sword, watching him squat on the dirt floor.

"Right here where we are is the village of Kahok, in Anyou Prefecture," the rat explained, drawing a crude map in the dirt with a pointed finger. "Now, here's the Void Sea, and Shin Prefecture where you came from is right around here." He indicated an area on what was apparently the eastern coast of the land he was sketching. "I figure Hairou is around here, so you came walking southwest. In other words, you came walking in from the coast toward the middle of Kou. Of course, you should be *leaving* Kou, so that means you've been going the wrong way."

Yoko looked down at the map, her feelings churning inside her. Could she trust this creature? Was he altering the map in some way? Despite her doubts, she stared at it, drinking in the details. This was the information she needed.

"Head west from here, and you get to North Ryou Prefecture. Keep going west from there, and you get to one of the inland seas, Seikai—the Blue Sea. On the far shore of that sea is the kingdom of En."

Rakushun's tiny finger scratched surprisingly elegant characters in the dirt. First for the *Blue Sea:*

青海

Then for *En:*

雁

"So I should head to North Ryou first?"

"Right. Eventually you'll want to get to the port town of Agan. From there you can get a ship to En."

"A ship?"

Would I even be able to board a ship? If the port is being watched, I'd be walking right into a trap.

"I should think you'd be fine," Rakushun said as though he could read her mind. "The fastest way out of Shin is to go straight north over the mountains into Kei. Even the searchers from the magistrate's office didn't think you'd come all this way west. So in a way, it was good you got lost. There's a wanted posting being sent 'round the villages, but they're looking for a young girl with red hair. If you can just do something 'bout that sword, why, I think you should be able to slip past their watch."

"Yes," said Yoko, standing. "Thank you."

Rakushun stared at her, startled. "Hey. You don't mean to leave now, do you?"

"I must hurry. I'm sorry to leave so soon after all you've done to take care of me. I wish I could return the favor . . ."

Rakushun got to his feet. "Just wait. My, but you sure are a hasty one."

"But . . ."

"What are you going to do once you're in En? Just going to grab every stranger you meet and ask 'em if they've seen this Keiki fellow? D'you even know how to get on a boat? How to look for aid once you're in En?"

Yoko dropped her eyes, suddenly feeling a little foolish. Having a destination was such a vast improvement over her previous aimless travel that she felt as though she were already there—but now Rakushun was pointing out the other obvious difficulties she would have. She began to suspect that she had only encountered a tenth of the hardships that awaited her.

"Everything requires preparations, see? Don't be so eager to rush off. Skip doing what's proper now, and you'll only run into trouble."

Inside, Yoko still feared that the rat might be beguiling her into some kind of trap, but it was becoming increasingly clear that she was not done relying on Rakushun just yet.

"Well. Shall we eat? You need your strength. It's a month's journey just to get to Agan, after all."

Yoko hung her head again.

She would wait, at least until she had regained her full strength. She would know Rakushun's true intent by then,

she decided. Maybe she had actually gotten lucky this time, or maybe this was all part of some hidden scheme. Regardless, Rakushun now knew more about her than she did about him. He knew where she was from, and that she was going to Agan—and from there to the kingdom of En. If she did nothing else before she left, Yoko had to even the odds.

"It was a rather unusually large shoku, I hear," Rakushun remarked, making conversation as they cleaned up from lunch.

"That's what the old woman in Hairou said."

"I hear the eastern part of Shin Prefecture lost its wheat crop for the year. That'll make winter hard."

Yoko nodded. Hearing about the destruction made her heart ache.

Evidently Rakushun noticed her mournful look. "Don't let it bother you, Yoko," he said gently. "Not your fault, eh?"

"It's not . . . I'm okay."

Yoko busied herself at her task, shoveling ash out of the bottom of the brick oven, but then she felt a short-furred tail tap her lightly on the hand. "Shoku don't happen because kaikyaku come. Kaikyaku come because there's a shoku."

Yoko dumped the ash into a small wooden box, then picked out the unburned nuggets of charcoal and placed them in a different box.

"Can I ask you a question?" she said after a while.

"What's that?"

"What *is* a shoku?" She had heard from the old crone in Hairou that it was like a storm, but she wasn't sure that quite explained it.

"Eh? Don't know what a shoku is? Guess you don't have 'em where you're from."

"Well, we do use the same character you use for *shoku* in the Japanese words for *solar* and *lunar eclipse*." Yoko wrote the two words out with her hand on the table, first *nisshoku*, or *solar eclipse:*

日蝕

Then *gesshoku*, or *lunar eclipse:*

月蝕

"That so?" replied Rakushun, raising a bushy eyebrow. "Well, I suppose you might call it an eclipse, though it don't do nothing to the sun or the moon. Like the crone said, it's a storm. But where a storm stirs up the wind and water, a shoku stirs up the spirit powers."

"But rain does fall, and the wind blows?"

"That happens. Some shoku come on just like a simple storm with great winds blowing every which way. Those shoku, minor ones, don't end up doing much harm. It's when the earth quakes, and lightning crashes, and the rivers flow backward, and the ground suddenly drops away—that's when you know you've got a real shoku on your hands. Why, they say that over in Hairou an entire lake boiled into thin air. Not a trace of it left—an entire lake!"

Yoko stopped in the middle of washing the ash off her hands. "It's that bad?"

"Like I said, depends on the shoku. But you can see why people are more scared of shoku than your run-of-the-mill storm. Never know what can happen with a shoku."

"I wonder what creates them? There's nothing like that in my world."

Rakushun poured tea with a serious face, his every movement grave and measured. "See, shoku happen when the Over There mixes a bit with the Over Here—kind of an overlap, a clash. The two worlds normally stay apart, but when they collide, disaster strikes. I'm not too clear 'bout the details meself, but that's what I've heard."

"Over There . . . and Over Here?" Yoko said quizzically, sipping at her hot tea. The tea that Rakushun served in his house looked very much like green tea. The aroma, however, was completely different, and the taste was more like a fine herb tea.

"By Over There I mean the lands across the Void Sea. By Over Here, I mean—well, here. This world. No name for that."

Yoko nodded.

"That said, the Void Sea surrounds all the lands of the known world. There *is* nothing beyond."

"Nothing? But didn't you just say Over There was across the Void Sea?"

"Well, it is and it isn't. See, you could get in a boat and sail forever and a day, and you'd never get to the other side. I've heard of some curious sorts who set off in ships to find out for themselves, but none of them ever come back."

"But if you went far enough, wouldn't you come back to where you started? Or . . . you mean the world is flat?"

Rakushun clambered up into his chair and gave Yoko a hard stare. "Of course the world's flat. Why, if it wasn't, we'd all roll off!"

The rat looked almost panicky. Yoko laughed. "Sorry, I just don't know much about this world, I guess."

In one hand, her furry companion picked up a walnut lying on the table and set it before them. "Here, in the middle of the world, is Mt. Soohsan."

"Soohsan?"

"Aye, written *grand* and *mountain*, like this:

崇山

That's its official name, anyhow. We just call it the Great Mountain, most of the time, though some people call it the Center Peak. Now on all four sides of that are other peaks: Houzan, the Mountain of the Sage's Brush to the east; Kazan, the Mountain of Flowers to the west; Kak'san, the Mountain of the Soaring Cry to the south; and Kouzan, the Mountain of Eternities to the north—five mountains in all."

Yoko nodded, trying to remember all the unfamiliar names.

"Now around those five mountains is the Kokai, the Yellow Sea:

黄海

It's called a sea, but mind you it's no normal sea—not the kind with water. No, it's a barren wasteland of rock, desert, swamp, and thorny tangle."

Yoko watched as Rakushun drew the characters with his finger.

"Have you been there?"

"Course not. The Kokai's surrounded on each side by the four Diamond Mountains. Inside their borders is no place for mortal folk."

"I see," Yoko said, not really understanding. The map that Rakushun was plotting out in walnuts on the table looked like some ancient chart of the world, before proper maps were made, based more on myth and legend than actual scientific cartography.

"The four inland seas are arranged around the Diamond Mountains, and the eight inner kingdoms, of which Kou is one, encircle them. Around that, we have the Void Sea. In the Void Sea, close to land, are four large islands, each one also a kingdom. So these four, plus the eight around the Diamond Mountains, make twelve kingdoms in all."

Yoko looked at the geometrically arranged walnuts on the table. They reminded her of a flower, with the five mountains at the center and the kingdoms arranged like petals around them.

"And there's nothing else?"

"Not a thing. Beyond this is the Void Sea only—a sea of nothing that stretches to the end of the world. Though—and this is where Over There comes in"—Rakushun's voice dropped to a mutter—"they say that there is a strange island at the eastern edge of the Void Sea, a place you cannot reach by normal means. A bit of a legend, really. The tales call it the land of Hourai . . . though I've heard some people call it *Japan*."

As he spoke, Rakushun wrote the characters for *Hourai:*

蓬莱

Then for *Japan:*

倭

Wait a second, thought Yoko, *that's the ancient word for Japan . . . how was it pronounced? Wa?*

"Don't you mean *Japan?*" Yoko asked, writing the modern characters for Japan:

日本

"Nope," Rakushun replied, pointing again to the single *Wa* he had written.

Yoko bit her lip. Was this her unseen translator working again?

"They say that kaikyaku come from Wa," Rakushun said, looking up at Yoko.

Yoko's eyes opened wide. This time she had clearly heard him say "Wa." Maybe her translator had decided that she knew the word now, so there was no need to convert it to "Japan" anymore. This was getting more and more mysterious.

"I wouldn't know the truth of it, but anytime people talk about kaikyaku, you're sure to hear mention of Wa. Some adventurous folk have even sailed off to seek Wa across the sea. Never came back, of course . . . but I s'pose you were expecting me to say that."

Yoko's mind raced. If somehow Japan really was far across the Void Sea, then there might be a chance that she could take a boat east and return home. Yet even as the thought came to her, she knew it was a hopeless dream. After all, she was the one who had come here through the moon's reflection on the sea. It hardly seemed the sort of trip one could reproduce with a ship, a sail, and a pair of oars.

"Now on the other side," continued Rakushun, "somewhere off in the Diamond Mountains, there's a peak called Konron. Around there is another kingdom of legend: China. That's where the *sankyaku* come from."

As he said the word *China*, Rakushun wrote the ancient word for China: *Kan*.

漢

"*Sankyaku*? You mean *mountain guests?*" Yoko said, drawing the characters on the table with her finger:

山客

Rakushun nodded.

"So . . . there are other people, besides the *kaikyaku*, who have come to this world from Over There?"

"So there are. Kaikyaku arrive on the shores of the Void Sea, and sankyaku show up in the foothills of the Diamond Mountains. Not many sankyaku in these parts, but the ones that do show up are hunted all the same."

"I see," Yoko sighed.

"Neither Kan nor Wa can be reached by the usual means. They say only demon-kin and wizards have the art. But every now and then, when there's a shoku, people from Over There get thrown into this world. Those're the sankyaku and the kaikyaku."

Yoko nodded. She had heard much the same from Takkee.

Rakushun glanced around the room then, and leaned in toward Yoko, whispering in a conspiratorial tone. "They say that in Kan and Wa, the houses are made of gold and silver. The land is rich, and the folk live like kings. The people there can

run through the skies, and cross a thousand li in a day! They say that there even an infant can defeat demons with its wondrous powers. They say that the demons and the wizards that live here got their spirit powers by crossing Over There and drinking from the deep mountain springs!" Rakushun looked at Yoko eagerly, obviously hoping for some kind of confirmation.

Yoko shook her head and laughed. *How preposterous!* she thought. If she told people back home such a story of wonders, they would think it some kind of fairy tale. *So*, she thought, *they have fairy tales in this world, too.*

An uneasy smile formed on Yoko's lips. She had spent all the time since her arrival wondering at the strangeness of this new world; but now she had a glimpse of how things looked from the other side, and she began to wonder which was truly more uncanny: the world, or herself?

And as soon as the thought crossed her mind, she knew the answer. That was why the kaikyaku were hunted. That was why someone, or something, wanted her dead.

"So all the kaikyaku that come to Kou end up dead, one way or another," Yoko observed, after a long while of silently pondering the fates of the many kaikyaku who had come before her. "And it looks like it will always be that way, until the people here start learning to separate the shoku from the kaikyaku."

"That's about the size of it," said Rakushun, sighing. He looked up at her. "Say, Yoko, what sort of work d'you do?"

"I'm a student."

Rakushun nodded, an eager sparkle in his eyes. "See, some of the kaikyaku, they have special knowledge—skills not known in our world. Those ones are protected by the higher-ups. They are allowed to live here. Maybe . . . ?"

Yoko smiled wryly and shook her head. His idea made sense. But she had no particular knowledge that she could imagine would ingratiate her with anyone in this world.

"Rakushun . . . do you know of a way that I might return to Wa?"

Rakushun frowned. "Sorry . . . there's nothing that I know of. And, though I probably shouldn't say this," he added, taking a deep breath, "I don't think there *is* a way back."

"But that can't be. If I came here, there has to be way back, doesn't there?"

Rakushun's whiskers drooped, and he made a sad, whining noise in his throat. "People can't cross the Void Sea, Yoko."

"But I *did* cross it. That's how I got here!"

"I don't think it works both ways. I've never heard of a kaikyaku, or a sankyaku for that matter, who made the return journey."

"But that's not fair," Yoko declared fiercely, knowing perfectly well that no one had ever promised her that her life would be fair. Nonetheless, somewhere inside her she still clung to the hope that she might someday be able to return. "What about a shoku? Could I just wait for one of those and go home that way?"

Rakushun shook his head slowly. "Maybe, but there's no way of knowing when and where a shoku might be coming. Well, I

s'pose there are some shoku you can see coming, but that don't change anything. People still can't go Over There."

That can't be, Yoko repeated to herself. *Keiki would have said something*. He had told her nothing of the sort; nothing in the way he'd acted had even suggested she might not be able to go home ever again.

"When I came from Wa, I was being chased by a kochou—"

"A kochou? One of those chased you Over Here?"

"Yes . . . and not just me. I was with a man named Keiki."

"Ah, the one you're looking for?"

"Yes. Keiki was the one who brought me Over Here. He said he had to bring me here to protect me, because the kochou was after me." Yoko looked intently at Rakushun. "Couldn't that mean that, if he no longer has to protect me, I can go home? He even said he would take me straight home if I demanded it."

"That sounds suspicious."

"Keiki had a beast that could fly through the air. A talking beast like you, Rakushun. He said if we flew straight, the journey there—here, I mean—would take a day. Doesn't that sound like we'd be able to go back? I mean, if it's a straight flight, no?"

Rakushun sat silently, seemingly unsure of how to answer.

"Rakushun?"

"Well, I wouldn't know about that. It certainly seems you've got yourself wrapped up in some real big goings-on."

"Important, you think? Why do you say that?"

"Well, first, you're talking 'bout kochou. Those're demons, you know, and that's big goings-on already. Talk like that'll clear a village in no time. Then you say the kochou was after

you? And it went all the way Over There to attack you? First time I've ever heard anything of the sort. And this fellow Keiki—you say he brought you Over Here?"

"Yes."

"All the tales I've heard, the ones that talk 'bout demons and wizards going back and forth, they only mention one person making the trip. Even if Keiki is one of those wizardly folks, I'd still be amazed if he managed to bring someone else back with him. I'm not sure what happened to get you here, but it certainly sounds pretty unusual. Nothing usual about it at all, really."

Rakushun thought deeply for a while, his beady black eyes staring into the distance, then turned to Yoko again. "So—what'll you do? Will you look for a safe place Here, in this world . . . or do you still want to try and go home?"

"I . . . want to go home," said Yoko.

Rakushun nodded. "I can understand that. I only wish I knew the way. But wherever you're headed in the end, I still think the first thing to do is get yourself to the kingdom of En."

"Yes. And then?"

"Well, I don't think an official or even the governor can help you. When you go to En, you must ask for aid from the Ever-King."

"The Ever-King?"

"Aye, that's what they call the king in En."

"And will he help me?"

"Who knows?"

It took Yoko some effort to keep from rolling her eyes.

"I can't foresee such things," Rakushun continued, "but anything is better than staying here. You've certainly got a better chance there than you do going to the lords in this backward kingdom. The Ever-King's a *taika*, you see."

"A *taika*?"

"Aye," said the rat, drawing the characters with his delicate paw:

胎果

"It means someone born Over There. They say it happens, but only very rarely. *Taika* are really people of this world, but they get born Over There by mistake."

Yoko's eyes went wide. "That happens?"

"Aye, very rarely, but it does. That said, I'm not sure whether it's them getting born Over There that's rare or the ones that get born Over There managing to come back here, if you follow."

Yoko nodded.

"There's three famous ones—famous *taika*, that is. One's the Ever-King of En, like I said, another's the minister of En, and another's the minister of Tai."

"Minister?"

"Aye. They're sort of advisors to the kings, see. Though I heard the minister of Tai passed away not long ago. And the Peace-King of Tai's gone missing, which has sent the whole place into turmoil, as you might expect. Yes, you'd best head into En. Try your luck there."

Yoko's head swirled, in part from all the information she'd absorbed in such a short time, and in part because in a few

moments she had gone from feeling she had no future to having a journey of months laid at her feet—a journey to meet a king!

Talking to a king was probably like talking to a president or prime minister in her old world. *Is it even possible?* she asked herself. At the same time she wondered if her situation really was as unique as Rakushun said it was.

As Yoko sat lost in thought, she became aware of a noise outside—the sound of footsteps approaching the house.

The front door creaked open to reveal a middle-aged woman standing on the path outside.

"Rakushun?"

Rakushun's ears perked up. "Mother!" he called out, whiskers twitching furiously. "I've, er, found us a most interesting . . . guest!"

Yoko sat dumbfounded. This was Rakushun's mother? The woman in the doorway was unmistakably human. For her part, the woman looked surprised too. Her eyes darted back and forth between Rakushun and Yoko.

"A guest? Where did you meet her?"

"I found her in the forest. She's a kaikyaku, washed in from Over There during that shoku in Shin Prefecture."

Yoko flinched.

So much for that *secret.*

The woman muttered something and shot a stern look at Rakushun.

Yoko readied herself. If this woman had heard about the escape of the kaikyaku from Shin, she might do anything. Would she protect Yoko as Rakushun had? Somehow, Yoko doubted it.

"Well." The woman turned to Yoko, her face relaxing into a smile. "That must've been a wild ride." She turned back to Rakushun. "What's wrong with you? You should have called me back. She must have been exhausted! And you took care of her all by yourself?"

Raksun's head bobbed up and down. "Yep! I took care of her good."

"Hmph. I wonder." The woman clicked her tongue. Then her bright eyes went back to Yoko. "I'm sorry I was not home to help. I had work in town. I hope Rakushun really looked after you as well as he claims."

"Oh . . . yes, he did," Yoko said, nodding. "I had a fever and couldn't move. He rescued me—saved my life, really. I owe you my gratitude."

The woman strode over to Yoko and put a warm hand on her forehead. Yoko flinched again.

"Are you sure you're all right? Maybe you shouldn't be standing."

"I'm fine, thank you. He really did take good care of me." Yoko chose her words with care, studying the woman's expression intently for any sign of deception.

She felt she could trust Rakushun a little at least. He was a beast, after all. Not human, like this woman.

I can't trust my own kind.

A shiver ran down Yoko's spine at the thought.

"Well he should've called his mother, the thoughtless runt," the woman declared, fixing Rakushun with a withering glare.

"But I did take special care of her, mum! She got better real quick."

The woman looked at Yoko. "Well then, I'm glad. Are you sure you're well enough to be walking around? You look pale; perhaps you need some more sleep."

"No, I'm fine, really."

"If you say so. And these clothes! Why, they're much too thin to wear in this chill. Rakushun, take out the extra kimono."

Rakushun hurriedly skidded into the next room, leaving Yoko alone with the woman he called his mother.

Yoko wondered what to say, but the woman, still talking, was already bustling about the room.

"What's this—the tea's all cold! Just a moment. I'll make some more."

She closed the front door, locked it, and then made her way to the well out back. Yoko's eyes followed her all the way. When Rakushun returned, bearing a thin overcoat of sorts, Yoko hurried over to him. "That's your mother?" she whispered.

"Aye. Don't have me a father. He died a long time ago."

Was Rakushun's father human, too? Or was he the rat? What was going on here?

"Um . . ." began Yoko, unsure of the proper words to use in this situation. "Is that your *real* mother?"

Rakushun gave her a confused look. "Of course she is. She's the one that picked me."

Yoko blinked. "Excuse me . . . picked?"

Rakushun nodded. "From the village tree. She picked the fruit I was in." Suddenly Rakushun's eyes went wide, as though he was just remembering something. "Say, is it true that Over There, children are born from their mothers' stomachs?"

"Well, sort of, yes. That . . . doesn't happen here?"

"I always wondered," continued Rakushun, not hearing her question. "Do the fruits grow in their stomachs? How do you pick them? Do they hang out or something?"

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

"Why, picking the eggfruit off the tree, what else?"

"Eggfruit?"

"Yes. About so big," he explained, cupping his hands as though holding a small ball. "It's a yellow fruit with a child inside. It grows on the village tree, and the parents go there to pick it. What, you don't have eggfruit Over There?"

Yoko put her hands lightly to her forehead. This was just too bizarre to comprehend.

"Looks like you don't," Rakushun said, noting her pained expression.

Yoko laughed wryly. "Over There, children are made in their mothers' bellies. The mother gives birth to them."

Rakushun's eyes opened even wider. "You mean like birds do?"

"Well, it's a little different, but I guess that's the same idea, yes."

"How are they made? You don't mean there're lifetree branches in the mother's tummy! How can you take a fruit from someone's insides?" Rakushun winced.

"Uh . . ." Yoko began, still holding her head in her hands. Just then, Rakushun's mother returned, smiling, with a bucket full of water.

"Well now, let's have tea. I hope you're hungry!"

Rakushun's mother insisted that her son tell Yoko's story. While he did, she busied herself about the kitchen, making them some steamed bread-like sweets with deft hands, but listening carefully all the while.

". . . So then," Rakushun said at last, gripping a lump of steamed bread in his small paw, "I was thinking she should try to go to En. And that's 'bout as far as we got."

Rakushun's mother nodded. "Yes, that's probably the best idea."

"So, I was also thinking"—Rakushun looked up at his mother—"maybe I could take Yoko as far as Kankyu. Will you help me pack?"

Rakushun's mother gave him a stern look. "Well, now . . . don't you think that's a little rash? Are you sure you're ready for such a trip?"

"Nothing to worry 'bout! It's just a little ways. Fairly little. Yoko's not familiar with the local land; she needs somebody to show her 'round. You'll be fine here by yourself, right?"

His mother stared at him for a while, then nodded. "Fine. I suppose this was coming sooner or later. Goodbye, Rakushun! Best get ready, then."

"Rakushun," cut in Yoko, "I appreciate the gesture, but I couldn't ask you to do this for me. If you just point me in the right direction, I'll be fine."

She didn't want anyone with her, but she couldn't just say as much. "Maybe you could draw me a copy of that map on something I could carry? That is, if it's not too much of a bother."

"Yoko. It will be tough enough for you getting into En, but getting an audience with the Ever-King by yourself? That'd be nigh well impossible. Even if you know the road, the trip to Kankyu is a journey of over three months. What will you do for food along the way? Lodgings? D'you have any money?"

Yoko fell silent.

"You'll never make it on your own. 'Specially since you don't know anything about this world."

Yoko thought deeply. Why was he doing this for her? Finally, she nodded. "Thank you," she said at last, glancing at the wrapped bundle of her sword out of the corner of her eye. "I accept."

She probably would be better off with Rakushun as a companion on the road; both he and his mother seemed genuinely interested in aiding her. But there was something else going on here that she couldn't quite put her finger on. She didn't think her unease was just a case of nerves.

Still, an inner voice murmured, *be they friend or foe, I cannot simply leave them here, knowing my purpose and destination as they do. If they go to the magistrate right after I leave, there will be a trap, not a ship, waiting for me in Agan.*

On the other hand, if she took Rakushun with her, he would be a sort of hostage, ensuring the mother's good behavior. And ultimately, if Rakushun himself endangered her, well . . . there was always the sword.

This is the only way, she thought, trying to ignore the sudden, sharp pang of self-loathing that twisted inexplicably inside her.

Yoko and Rakushun left the house five days later.

If nothing else, she had rested well during her stay. Whether or not it was all an act, both mother and son were very kind to her, though the blue monkey's words of caution rang in the back of her mind the whole time.

You don't know what they're thinking . . .

Rakushun's mother had been a tremendous help preparing them for the journey. Even though her house seemed far poorer than even Takkee's had been, she managed to dig up a crude, yet serviceable change of clothes for Yoko. Her daytime outfit now consisted of a large man's kimono, tailored to fit her serviceably enough, which she surmised had originally belonged to Rakushun's late father.

The clothes and hospitality in turn made Yoko more wary. It was hard to imagine that her two hosts were doing so much for her out of the goodness of their hearts. Rakushun she could almost trust; he wasn't like the others—the human folk—she had met in this world. But Yoko did not have the courage to trust his mother.

"Why do you help me like this?" Yoko finally got up the nerve to ask, just as they were about to lose sight of the little house on the hillside.

Rakushun fiddled with the tips of his whiskers with a small fur paw. "Well, for one, you'd have no chance of getting to Kankyu by yourself."

"But wouldn't it be enough just to teach me the way?"

"Nah. Besides, Kankyu is a nice place. I've heard lots of interesting things 'bout it. People say it's a lot like Over There. Of course, that makes sense with the king being from Over There himself."

"By that, do you mean he's from Wa, or Kan?"

"Where you're from—Wa."

"So . . . that's it? You're coming with me for a little sightseeing?"

Rakushun looked up at Yoko. "Still don't trust us, Yoko?"

"It's just that you're too kind. It's hard to believe."

The rat scratched at the fur on his chest and shifted the weight of the large cloth satchel swung over his back. "Well, we're floating in the same boat, as it were. As you can see, I'm a beastling."

"A what?"

"A beastling, or half-beast—we're called *hanjyu*. Our kind isn't favored by the king here in Kou, just as he doesn't like kaikyaku. Tell you the truth, he doesn't like anything out of the ordinary, really."

Yoko merely nodded.

"Now, kaikyaku aren't very common at all. They come in on the eastern shore, so there may be more here than in other lands, but nobody really knows for sure."

"How many do you think?"

"Well I'd say only about one comes every three years or so, tops—the ones that survive, that is."

"I see," said Yoko. That was still more than she had imagined.

"Kei gets the most of them. It's the farthest east, after all. Next would be En. Kou comes in third, and we don't have a whole lot of beastlings, either. Not really sure why, though."

"Are there more in other countries?"

"Well, more than in Kou, at least. Why, I'm the only beastling in this whole area that I know of. Our king isn't a bad king, but he has his little quirks, and kaikyaku and hanjyu, well, we got the short end of the stick." Rakushun fiddled with his whiskers. "There's no rhyme or reason to it, either. Not to ring me own bell, but I'm 'bout the brightest fellow in these parts, humans included."

Yoko looked at Rakushun, confused.

"I'm clever, sharp-eyed, and good-natured."

Yoko laughed. "Are you now?"

"Still, they don't treat me like a person. I'm half a person at best. That was decided when I was born like this. Not that it's me fault."

Yoko nodded. So, he sympathized with her because they were both discriminated against. That made sense, though Yoko still doubted that was the whole story.

"It's like your trouble. The officials are after you, but not because of something you did. It's only because you're a kaikyaku. See? Not your fault!"

"I see."

Rakushun gave the fur under his ear a particularly good scratch. "You know, I went to the top school in the region. And I was top in me class. They even selected me as a scholar of the state, recommended me for the Lesser Learning. That's the top school in Jhun. If you go there, you can even become a regional official."

"And a region is larger than a prefecture, right?"

"Yeah, it goes prefecture, then territory, then region, see? Every province's got a few regions. Though the number differs by province. Now, a region's got 'bout fifty thousand households in four territories. Each one of 'em's got 'bout twelve thousand five hundred households and five prefectures. Political geography was me specialty," Rakushun explained with a twinkle in his eye.

Yoko merely nodded. She had trouble envisioning fifty thousand households. How many households did Tokyo have, anyway?

"Of course, they weren't even supposed to let me into the regional school. But Mum fought for it hard. 'Get good grades, you can go to an even higher school and become an official of the kingdom,' she'd say. Because I'm a beastling, I could never get land, but if I got rank, well, I could be the keeper of some measly little farm, at least." Rakushun sighed. "They stopped me at the doors. 'No hanjyu in the Lesser Learning,' they said."

"That's too bad," Yoko declared, not sure what else she should say.

"Me mum sold both field and house to put me in the Upper School, you know."

"She did? So she doesn't have fields of her own now?"

"She works the private fields for a rich man who lives nearby."

"Private fields?"

"Aye. The land the officials assign you is called granted land. The land you cultivate yourself, with permission of course, is private land. Me mum is the only one in the family who works; I don't. I want to work, but I can't. No one will hire a beastling. They lose too much on taxation."

Yoko furrowed her brow. "Why's that?"

"Well, some beastlings are like bears or oxen. They're stronger than average people, you see, so having them seems an unfair advantage, and the farmer gets taxed more. Of course, that don't mean much when you're born a wee ratling, but the officials don't bother to make that distinction when it comes time for taxation. The long and the short of it is that the king here just dislikes beastlings."

"That's horrible."

"Well, we don't have it as bad as you kaikyaku. At least they aren't trying to catch us or kill us. Still, we aren't counted among the people; we don't get fields, and we can't find work. So me mum has to work to support both of us. That's why we're so poor."

Yoko nodded. It seemed lots of things in this world weren't fair; but then again, she couldn't claim that things had been fair where she came from either.

"It's not that I don't want to work. I do." Rakushun lifted up the money pouch around his neck. "This is all the money Mum

saved to put me in a Lesser Learning in En, where beastlings can go all the way the top, to the Great Learning. They can even become officials of the kingdom. They're treated like people, and can have fields and their own family estate. I thought, maybe, if I brought you along, I might be able to find a place for me in En."

There we go, thought Yoko cynically. *Now we see the real reason for Rakushun's eagerness.* Surely he didn't mean her harm, but it hadn't been pure goodwill either. *When did he first get the idea to use me as an escort to En? When he saw the sword?*

"I see," Yoko said, her voice filled with thorns.

The pitter-patter of Rakushun's feet abruptly stopped. He looked up at Yoko for a while, but said nothing.

Yoko too, fell silent.

People live for themselves. Even if they claim to be doing something out of altruism, if you press hard enough, you'll find they have some personal stake in it.

She knew she shouldn't resent Rakushun for having his own agenda. Why, it was only natural. Yoko sighed inwardly. It was because people lived for themselves and themselves alone that there was betrayal in the world—in every world. Maybe she had been naïve to even imagine someone could live for another. No, she saw now, it was just impossible.

In the evening of their first day of travel, Yoko and Rakushun arrived in a town called Kakrak. It was at least as big as Kasai,

and at first Yoko was intimidated by the sight of it; but their overnight stay proved uneventful, and as the journey continued, she soon learned to take such places in stride.

Yoko also adapted quickly to the fact that her travels were now much more frugal than they had been when she was with Takkee. She and Rakushun ate only simple peasant fare at roadside stalls and slept in the cheapest lodgings they could find. They usually took a single fifty-sen room at a run-down inn, putting up a divider for a modicum of privacy. Yoko didn't complain, since Rakushun was paying for everything.

On the road, Rakushun told people that Yoko was his brother. If a beastling could have a human mother, Yoko supposed, a human sibling wasn't out of the question. And, from what she could tell, no one seemed to doubt it.

The journey was easy at first. Rakushun passed the time on the road by telling her things about his world.

"Now in the twelve kingdoms there are four central, four middle, and four outer kingdoms, you see."

"And the four central kingdoms are . . . ?" Yoko asked, turning to look at her companion, who was shuffling along behind her.

"Kei in the east, Sou in the south, Han in the west, Ryu in the north. On a map they're not much more 'central' than the middles, but that's what we call 'em. The four middle kingdoms are En, Kyou, Sai, and of course Kou, here. Finally we got the four outer kingdoms: Tai, Shun, Hou, and Ren.

"Now," Rakushun continued, "each of those kingdoms has got a king, obviously. The king of Kou's called the Naze-King,

and his palace is the Jadegrove Palace in Gosou in the province of Ki."

"Gosou? Is that a town?"

Rakushun nodded and pointed to the mountains visible to their left. "The name means Place Where the Frost Is Proud."

The terrain through which they were passing was very hilly. Far off to the left, a range of higher hills could be seen, and beyond that, a steep mountain range.

"It's beyond those mountains. There's a mountain that reaches all the way to the heavens: that's Mount Gosou. At its peak is Jadegrove Palace, and the town of Gosou encircles its base."

Yoko nodded. She had given up trying to think of meaningful questions, as she was rather sure that the lecture would continue regardless.

"That's where the king rules his kingdom from. He gives his orders to the governors, promulgates his laws and judgments, and divides the land up among the people."

"What do the governors do?"

"The governors are the ones in charge of each province. They manage the land, the people, and the armies. They make sure the kingdom's laws are obeyed, they levy taxes, and they keep the army ready in case of trouble."

"So the king isn't much involved with ruling the people directly, is he?"

"No, I suppose he's more like a supervisor. He decides the overall direction of the kingdom's governance."

Yoko wasn't sure she entirely understood, but it was beginning to sound like a sort of indirect government like the one they had in America—not necessarily the dictatorship she had expected.

"The king sets the laws to be followed in his kingdom," Rakushun went on. "We call them the Ropes of the Land. Now the governors, too, can make their own laws, but they can't go against the Ropes of the Land. And the Ropes of the Land can't go against the Ropes of Providence."

"Ropes of Providence? What are those?"

"Those are the ways of ruling handed down from Heaven to the kings of this world. If you think of this world as a kind of pavilion, the Ropes of Providence are its supports. They're what's holding it all up. We call 'em the Great Ropes or Heaven's Ropes sometimes. Even if you're king you have to follow them. But as long as the king isn't going against the Great Ropes, then he can do whatever he wants in his own kingdom."

"Wait," said Yoko, "so who decides what the Great Ropes are? There aren't really gods up there, are there?"

Rakushun laughed, shrugging his shoulders. "It's said that a long, long time ago, the Emperor of Heaven conquered the Nine Provinces and the Four Tribes, thirteen lands in all. Then he took the world and wrapped it all up in an egg, leaving five gods and twelve men outside. Then in the middle of that egg he created the five mountains, installed the Dowager of the West as ruler over all, turned the lands surrounding the Five Mountains into the Yellow Sea, and sent the five gods to be the Dragon Kings of the five seas."

"Sounds like a myth."

"I s'pose it is. It's also said that he gave twelve branches to each of the twelve men. A snake was coiled around each branch, and each bore three golden fruits. The men bowed to the snakes and sent them down into the world, and then they cast the fruits into the air. Where they fell they formed the land, the kingdoms, and the thrones. The branches then became brushes."

Yoko nodded politely. Rakushun's story was sounding more and more like fanciful mythology, but unlike any she had heard before.

"Now the snakes, they symbolize the Great Ropes. The land stands for the households we are given by the state, the kingdom means the laws, and the throne symbolizes the sages—in other words, the ministers. Last but not least, the brushes stand for history."

Rakushun stroked his whiskers thoughtfully. "Of course, I wasn't born back then, so I can't tell the truth of it for sure."

"Right," said Yoko, her head spinning. She had read a book about the myths of China when she was a child, many years before, but what she could remember from it wasn't anything like this.

"So, this Emperor of Heaven, is he the most powerful god?"

"I s'pose you'd call him that, aye."

"So, when you pray to somebody, who do you pray to? The Emperor of Heaven?"

Rakushun tilted his head quizzically at this. "I s'pose you might ask him for little favors, yes, if that was your fancy."

"What about praying for good harvests and things like that?"

"Ah, that'd be the High Emperor for that. There's some people that worship the High Emperor for that reason alone. Others worship the Eastern Emperor, to avoid flooding and the like, and others the Yellow Emperor, to ward off demons."

"So there's lots of these emperors?"

"Aye, and each with a cult of followers."

"A cult? Well then, who do normal people worship? Anyone?"

"Not me. Why, if you work your fields well, and the weather holds, you'll get a bountiful harvest. No Emperor is going to change that, and it's the climate that'll say whether your weather is good or bad. You can cry and you can laugh all you want, but when the rain falls, it falls, and when it don't, it don't. Praying won't help anything."

Yoko found this surprising. "But what about floods and storms, and . . . and shoku? I mean, I think if you're going to pray for anything it would be to avoid disasters like that."

"That's why the king made the waterworks and channeled the rivers—to prevent flooding."

"And frosts?"

"Well, not much anyone can do 'bout that. But the king does keep a store of grain to prevent famine in that case."

Yoko frowned. "Where I come from, people pray to the gods so they'll do well on their examinations, or have good fortune

with money. And I know in some other countries, people pray to their gods for just about everything. Don't you do that here?"

Rakushun squinted at her. "Well, I'd say success depends on how much work you do. How's praying going to help that?"

"Well, yes, I suppose you're right."

"If you study hard enough, you'll pass your examinations, and if you make enough money, well, you'll get rich. I don't see what prayer's got to do with it."

Yoko smiled—then abruptly the smile froze on her face.

I get it now.

There was no such thing as a godsend in this world, no such thing as luck, no good fortune to hope for. That was why the people took any chance they could to make money, even if it meant selling out a friend.

"You don't say," Yoko muttered, her own voice sounding cold to her ears. Rakushun quickly glanced up at her, then looked back down, his whiskers drooping toward the ground, before she thought anything of it.

Rakushun was well learned and quite clever, if he did say so himself. Yoko appreciated how difficult it had to be for him, to be so smart and able yet doomed to be a burden on his mother because of the accident of his birth. As the journey continued, she listened willingly as he told long tales of his upbringing and stories of the lands around them; knowing the value of information, she avidly drank in all he had to say. When he wanted to know more

about her, however, or more about Japan, Yoko avoided the topic. And so they passed the first five days of their journey.

The attack came on the sixth day after they had left Rakushun's home in Kahok.



It was near evening. Yoko and Rakushun had just come within sight of the gates of the town of Goryou, where they planned to stay the night. All the travelers who were still on the highroad were hastening along toward the gates; Yoko and Rakushun moved into their midst, picking up speed to keep pace.

When the town was only a quarter mile distant, the sound of a beating drum, as if to hurry the stragglers, came echoing from within its walls. Yoko, who had heard such a drum on her journey before, knew that when it finished beating, the gates would close.

The travelers quickened their pace even more until they were running in a disorderly pack toward the town. The first sign of trouble was a shout from within the crowd. Here and there, people stopped, looking behind them, then up toward the sky—and the crowd came to a sudden standstill. Alarmed, Yoko glanced up to see the silhouettes of a flock of giant birds swiftly approaching.

Wings on high . . . giant birds like hawks with horns . . . eight in all.

"Kochou!" someone shouted, and the mob of travelers became a stampede toward the gates of Goryou. Yoko began to

run, Rakushun scuttling along furiously beside her, but it was clear that the kochou would overtake them.

All at once the big gates began to swing shut. Anyone still upon the road was being abandoned.

No!

It made sense. The townspeople wanted to protect themselves from the kochou. They owed the travelers nothing. *Still*, Yoko wondered, *what good will closed gates do against creatures that can fly?*

"Please, wait!"

"Wait!"

Still running, the crowd erupted in panicked screams. Yoko quickly pushed her way out from among them, yelling for Rakushun to follow. They would have a better chance in the open field, where she could use her sword without worrying about the people around her.

It was a lucky turn that they were still far from the gates. Closer to the town there was utter chaos as people dashed themselves against the walls; every man, woman, and child fought for safety as newcomers pushed up against those who had arrived just as the gate closed, trampling the weaker underfoot. All were screaming.

Separated from the rushing crowd at last, Yoko ran at a slow jog toward the town, keeping just off the road; a thin smile crossed her face.

No gods to save you here.

Floods came and demons attacked, yet no one in this world cried out to their gods for salvation. That was why they each

ran alone, leaving their fellow men behind. That was why the gates closed, leaving the travelers outside to die. Without divine aid, without luck, whether one was attacked by demons or not depended entirely on how much caution one took. Whether one was killed or spared depended entirely on one's strength.

If that's the case, many will die here tonight.

A shriek like the wailing of an infant stopped Yoko in her tracks. Rakushun skittered ahead, shouting back over his shoulder at her. "Yoko! We'll never make it!"

"To the town, Rakushun!"

The lead kochou was close enough now that Yoko could see the pattern of the feathers on its breast. Keeping it in her sight she pointed Rakushun toward the city gates, and with a steady arm she swept the cloth wrapping off her sword.

An all too familiar sensation ran beneath her skin. Yoko was well accustomed to the feel of Joyu by now. She welcomed it.

Yoko smiled broadly.

Oh, we'll make it.

Kochou were easy, as demons went, and there were only eight. Yoko's sword could cut through the thickest of sinew, and in fact it helped that the monsters were so large. They made easy targets, and because they had to fly straight, it was easy to gauge the timing of their attacks.

It had been so long since she'd had to fight anything, and here she was, smiling. Yoko was amazed at herself.

Her wounds had healed, her strength returned, and she had an indomitable confidence. It made her feel proud in a way to

hear the people helpless, screaming—people who were supposed to be hunting her, the kaikyaku.

At the last moment, Yoko turned and raised her sword to meet the evil flock as it swept toward her on a foul-smelling wind. The blood surged in her veins, and a restless sea pounded in her ears.

I am a beast. A demon, like them.

How else could she explain her joy at the promise of battle?

The slaughter began, for both kochou and the travelers.

She slew the first one that dove, then the second; by the time she had finished half their number, the road ran red with blood.

The fifth great bird came plummeting at her. Yoko dodged to the side and swung her sword with deadly precision, lopping off the monster's head as it hurtled by. The headless corpse slammed into the ground and rolled several times before coming to a stop. Yoko whirled back around just in time to see the sixth kochou bearing down on her. She leapt to avoid it, throwing her self prone, and watched as the demon, outraged at having missed its mark, soared on toward the travelers huddled by the town gate to wreak its vengeance on them.

Yoko rose into a fighting stance, catching her breath. Throughout, she had performed her killing work with utmost efficiency. She had grown used to the smell of blood, the severing of flesh and bone; the sight of the fallen dead gave her little pause. In an instant she had rejoined the fray. Evading the

sharp claws of her foes, she struck them down with her flashing blade, ducked away from the sprays of hot blood, and knew nothing else for a time.

When the seventh kochou fell to the ground, Yoko stood and peered into the sky. The eighth remained aloft, high above. It flew in a great circle through the twilit air, apparently uncertain what it should do. The sky had rapidly darkened with the approach of night until it was the color of rusted metal, cut by the black silhouette of the demon bird.

Even with Joyu's aid, she could not chase it into the sky.

"Come down," Yoko muttered. *Come here, where my claw can reach you.*

Still glaring at the circling shape, Yoko began to search her surroundings, glancing out of the corners of her eyes.

The kochou had attacked during the daytime, which meant *she* was likely to be nearby. *The woman with golden hair.*

Where was she? Surely Yoko should see her if she was near. And when she did find her, Yoko would catch her this time. She could do that now, she was sure. Then Yoko would find out what she wanted to know. And if the woman wouldn't talk, Yoko would cut off an arm and see what she had to say about that.

Abruptly, Yoko stopped, stunned by the wildness of her own thoughts. *Is this my true nature—a beast?*

What was this animosity inside her? Or was it merely blood-lust, the frenzy of the battle . . . ?





Far above her, the shadow changed its path in mid-flight. Yoko saw it swoop, and she strengthened her grip on her sword. She lifted the blade high, and the demon-bird changed direction once again, flying back up to circle once more.

"Come down!" Yoko shouted at the sky.

Demons shouldn't fear death. Perhaps it's merely startled to find such difficult prey.

Yoko raised her sword and stabbed it deep into the corpse of a kochou at her feet.

"Come, or I'll cut up the bodies of your friends, you hear me?!"

There. That got its attention.

Moments after she stabbed its fallen comrade, the circling kochou swooped down. Yoko pulled her sword from the corpse just in time to meet the talons that flashed like arrows toward her. Sparks flew from the blade as she parried, and Yoko twisted the sword, driving its point through one of the kochou's legs.

The bird shrieked and flapped its wings. Buffeted by the wind, Yoko feared the creature would lift her into the sky. Wrenching her sword free with both hands, she threw herself at the ground, rolled once, then sprang up again and thrust her blade at the hovering bird's broad chest. She felt the blow sink home and jumped to the side, pulling the weapon with her, narrowly dodging a spray of fresh blood.

The rest was easy. The creature no longer had the strength to fly. Teetering on its hind legs, it lunged at her a second time, then a third, before she decapitated it. She whisked the sword

through the air, shaking a ribbon of blood from the blade. By that time, nothing around her was moving at all.

The kouchou were not all that lay near the road in the deepening twilight. The bodies of travelers caught by the demons were scattered here and there. She heard moaning—some of them had survived.

Yoko watched them coolly as she wiped the blade of her sword on the nearest kochou's corpse. Then she remembered.

I did not come here alone.

"Rakushun?!"

She looked along the road toward Goryou and saw that the town gates had opened. The guardsmen spilling out of the narrow opening looked tiny at this distance.

Yoko scanned the stretch of ground between her and the towns' walls. In a moment she spotted, a short distance away, a mass of gray fur drenched red with blood.

"Rakushun . . ."

Yoko started to run over to the body, then stopped, looking up again at the town gate. The guardsmen and the other people running out of the town were shouting something, but she couldn't make out what they were saying.

Yoko looked at Rakushun, then back at the gates.

She couldn't tell at this distance how bad Rakushun's wounds were, but it seemed unlikely that all the blood on his fur had come from the kochou on the ground beside him.

She grasped the gem that hung around her neck. Would its magic work on others, or was it like the sword—only hers to use? She didn't know. She hadn't tried. But if it did work, she could use it to save Rakushun.

Yoko's mind raced. She should run over to see how badly he was wounded, and if it was severe, she should try to use the gem. That would be best for Rakushun, without a doubt. Yet she stood perfectly still.

While she was helping him, the guards were sure to reach her. They weren't that far away.

Yoko stood out like a sore thumb, the only person standing among the bodies by the road. Worse, if the guardsmen had been watching from the safety of the gates they would have seen that the kochou were after her . . . and they would have watched with amazement—horror, perhaps—as Yoko defeated them. Every person in the town would be suspicious of her, if not outright terrified.

From there, she could guess what would happen. Her sword had no scabbard. If they checked, they would soon find that her hair was dyed. Then they would know she was the wanted kaikyaku.

But, if I run . . .

She looked at the motionless bundle of bloodied fur. What would Rakushun have to say if Yoko abandoned him here to die?

She travels alone, carrying a sword wrapped in cloth, hair dyed black, wearing men's clothes. She's heading for Agan, to cross into the kingdom of En . . .

If these things became known, then the net woven around Yoko would close in a flash. She couldn't leave him lying here.

Yet she lacked the strength to run back and carry him with her. The guards would catch her for sure.

For Rakushun's sake, she had to go back. But for Yoko's sake . . .

Her pulse throbbed loudly in her ears.

Then, she heard a voice through the surging tide that filled her mind: *Run to the rat, and kill him.*

Who's there? Who said that? Joyu? Me?

There was no time think it through. If Rakushun said something he shouldn't, Yoko was doomed. She couldn't go back. That would be throwing everything away. She couldn't leave Rakushun here, either. That was just as dangerous.

So what, then . . . Go back, do what's best for me? I could even take his money pouch. That would get me out of this fix. It's the only way, and I have time. Time to do that, at least.

She glanced up. The gates to town were opened wide, and a crowd spilled out onto the plain. They were running, sweeping toward her. Reflexively, Yoko turned to bolt.

Once she started running, she couldn't stop.

Yoko ran back toward the road, where a crowd of late-arriving travelers was just coming to the scene of the carnage. Slipping through a caravan train, Yoko wove her way to the far side of the newly gathered crowd, and with them between her and the townspeople from the gates, she fled back down the road.



He's fine. He must be . . .

Yoko repeated this mantra to herself as she jogged down the road in the dark.

Once the sun had gone completely down and the road had cleared of people, she ran without care for stealth. Leaving Goryou behind, she turned at the first intersection she reached, choosing a new road to avoid going back to where she had spent the previous night.

Even once she had put a fair distance between herself and the intersection, Yoko did not slow her pace. She felt that if she didn't hurry, something would catch up with her.

He's got to be okay.

Even if Rakushun did tell them about her, they didn't have photographs in this world. They wouldn't be able to find her that easily. And Rakushun had protected her, hadn't he? He couldn't tell them that he had harbored an escaped kaikyaku, or he would risk penalty himself.

Yoko told herself this until she believed it; finally, she stopped running. She felt empty inside and shivered with a chill that had nothing to do with the cooling night air.

That's not what I should be thinking. Is Rakushun safe? Did he survive? Yoko hadn't seen any deep wounds on him, but could she be sure?

You have to go back.

She had to at least find out whether he was safe or not. If he had survived, then she would be free to leave.

No . . . It's too dangerous.

Even if she went back, what could she do?

You have the gem.

So what? What if it doesn't work on Rakushun? What if he's already dead?

If she went back, she would be caught for her trouble, having accomplished nothing. And once she was captured, she was as good as dead.

You value your life so much? Above anyone else's?

Of course I do.

He saved your life. And you would abandon him?

Who says he saved my life? I would have lived. I could've made it.

He saved you. He protected you.

He did it to help himself. There's no such thing as goodwill. People will always betray you to advance their own ends.

So what if he had personal reasons? Does that make it all right to abandon someone? Are you sure? All those wounded lying there—one of them your friend—can you just leave them all to their fate? Shouldn't you at least have helped the people who came to aid them? Maybe you could have saved some of them. Their deaths are on your hands.

A beautiful sentiment, but that doesn't cut it Over Here. Here, if you draw the short straw, you lose. You die. *I'm not going to lose.*

It's not just a sentiment. It's called humanity.

Humanity. Had she even forgotten what it meant to be human?

You would criticize the way I choose to live my life, even now? After all I've been through?

Yes. Because *of all you've been through.*

Because?!

"Go back. Kill the rat!"

Yoko jumped at the grating voice from behind her. She turned to see the blue monkey peering through the bushes at the side of the road and grinning.

"Your thoughts exactly, hrmm?"

Yoko stared at the monkey, dumbfounded. Her whole body trembled.

"You were going to kill him, weren't you, dearie? And here you're still thinking about morality, after all you've been through?" The monkey cackled, a joyous gleam in its eyes. "Oh, you've grown, you've grown. Don't worry. You'll be able to kill next time."

"No!"

The cackling monkey ignored her outburst, his high voice echoing mercilessly in Yoko's ears.

"I'm going back," she declared.

"What's the point? He's long dead!"

"You can't know that."

"Oh, he's dead. But be my guest. Go back! Get caught and killed for no reason at all."

"I'm still going back. No matter what you say." Yoko turned and began to walk back in the direction from which she had come.

"Oh, maybe you think that will absolve you of your sins?"

Yoko stopped.

"Go back! Go and weep over his little furry corpse. Just go on telling yourself that you never thought of killing him, hrmm?"

Yoko stared blankly at the smiling simian.

This is me. This is my shallow, little voice. These are my true feelings, nothing more, nothing less.

"Oh, not that he wouldn't have betrayed you in the end. Good thing all this happened before that, eh?"

"Shut up, fiend."

"Hey! Those guards might be coming this way right now! Maybe the rat squealed?"

"I said shut up."

Yoko lashed out with her sword, cutting the tips off a swath of grass.

"Hope he's dead, for your sake. Oh, it would have been so perfect if you'd only had the strength to end it—so tidy. You're still a little weak, still a little soft around the edges, hrmm?"

"Be quiet!"

"You'll do it next time. Next time a friend falls, you'll run 'em through."

"I hate you!"

The blade swished through the grass again.

She couldn't imagine what would have happened if she had really gone through with it and killed poor Rakushun. Just having abandoned him was destroying her now; how could she have lived with his blood on her hands?

Isn't it enough just to live? Even if it means becoming the most horrible of creatures, isn't it enough just to live?

No. I'm glad I didn't kill him.

She was glad she hadn't acted in haste or rage. She was glad beyond anything else that she hadn't done it.

The monkey laughed derisively at her. "So you let him live, so he can rat you out, the rat! Where's the good in that, hrmm?"

"Rakushun can say what he wants!"

The swirling emotion in her chest finally found a voice and tears ran streaming down her cheeks. "He has that right. He can say whatever he wants about me!"

"Still soft, Yoko. Still soft."

Why am I unable to trust?

She wasn't being asked to go on blind faith. There could be levels of trust. She should have been able to give the rat some credit, if no one else. She owed him her life.

"Still so soft, and they can see it, you know. That's why they betray you. You're an easy target."

"Let them betray me, then."

"Soft!" The monkey's cackling laughter cut through the night. "Are you sure? Sure you're happy with this pathetic state of affairs? Happy to be a fool, a fat duck ripe for stabbing in the back?"

"Let them betray me. It only makes them more cowardly, and harms me not at all. It's better than becoming a coward like them."

"Ah, but it's the cowardly who win, don't you see? This is a land of demons, Yoko. Demons! No one cares for you. Not a kind soul in the land!"

"That doesn't have to change who I am!"

So, no one would be truly benevolent, ever. So what? Was that reason enough to abandon someone who had shown her

kindness? Sure, it may not have been pure altruism, but couldn't she have trusted it for what it was? Could she not choose to return favor for favor, kindness for kindness? If not, what did that say about her—that she had become so heartless she could just cut everyone off, sever all ties of trust, of friendship?

Surely Yoko could still trust others, even if betrayal was all they gave her in return. Even if she were truly all alone in this vast world, without a soul to aid her, without a soul to comfort her, that would still be no reason for *her* to act cowardly, trust no one, abandon her friends—or worse, to actively harm another.

The monkey's hysterical laughter stabbed at her ears.

"Oh, I think it does."

"I must be strong," Yoko murmured, gripping the hilt of her sword.

This world, other people . . . all are meaningless. I can make my own decisions. I can become strong enough to live on my own terms, proud to be who I am. Not what they would make me.

Suddenly, the monkey stopped laughing. "No," it hissed. "You will die. You cannot go home, and no one will miss you! You'll be fooled, and betrayed, and you will die."

"I will not die."

If she died here, now, it would be an admission that she was the foolish coward she had felt herself becoming. It would be all too easy to brand her life as one not worth living, but that was escapism. She couldn't live in denial of her humanity. She couldn't let herself do that.

"You will die. You will starve, and be hung out to die, exhausted and spent—!"

Yoko swung her sword with all her strength. The blade slashed through grass, bushes, and the darkening air—and she felt it impact with something else. The monkey's head, still glowing a pale blue, shot through the dim night. Yoko watched, unbelieving, as it fell to the ground and rolled among the shadows, leaving a trail of blood behind it.

"I will not lose myself," she said, wiping her eyes. She had been crying the whole time.

Yoko dried her eyes with a rough-woven sleeve. She had just begun to walk away when she noticed a glimmer of gold at her feet. For a while, she stood in a daze, staring at it, unsure of what it meant.

In the middle of a puddle of blood that spread like a stain upon the ground, right where the head of the blue monkey should have been, she saw something that made no sense.

Something she had thought lost, long ago.

It was the scabbard to her sword.

CHAPTER SIX

"About this tall?" Yoko held her hand roughly a child's height from the ground. "He looks like a rat."

The old woman looked at Yoko suspiciously. "Eh, what's that? A hanjyu?"

"Yes. I heard he was injured in front of the gates yesterday evening."

"Ah . . . the kochou!" the old woman exclaimed, turning away. The town of Goryou was just visible in the distance. "Well, I wouldn't know. But if you're looking for one of the wounded, he'll be at the town office. That's where they were taken to be cared for."

Yoko had heard much the same thing from everyone she had met this morning.

She had waited for the dawn to return to Goryou, but when it did she discovered that the guard at the town's gates was so strong she had no hope of entering undetected. Even if she had managed to get inside, the town office was the last place she could let herself be seen.

"You've been there to check, have you?"

"Yes . . . he wasn't there."

"Then he's probably around back," the old woman said, walking off with her heavy load.

Behind the town, in the shadow of the walls, was the mournful hollow where they had laid out the bodies of the dead. She had scanned it from a distance, but the guard there, too, was strong. She couldn't get close enough to see whether Rakushun was among the corpses.

Yoko watched the old woman move off slowly, then turned to wait for the next traveler coming out of Goryou.

"Excuse me . . ."

This time it was a couple. The man had a bandage wrapped around one leg, and he leaned on a cane. The two turned suspicious looks at her.

"I'm sorry, I heard there were wounded yesterday—"

"You!" the man shouted, suddenly jabbing a finger at Yoko. "You're the one! The one with the sword—"

Yoko whirled around before the man had finished speaking.

"Hey, you, stop!"

Heedless of the man's shouts, she fled, weaving through the other travelers on the road.

Judging by his leg, the man had probably been among those wounded in the demons' attack. And he remembered her.

She had already run away like this many times today. Each time, it seemed the number of guardsmen at the gates increased, forcing her to stay farther and farther away from the town.

Yoko knew it would be safest to leave Goryou and wait in the mountains until the commotion died down. If she kept loitering on the roadway, the guards would catch her before long. Still, somehow she couldn't bring herself to leave. She had to know.

Why does it matter what happened to him?

Merely checking on whether Rakushun had survived would not absolve her for having abandoned him the day before. What was done was done and couldn't be taken back.

Moreover, even if she did hear he was alive, she wouldn't be able to go into town to apologize. The moment she stepped through those gates, she would be recognized and captured. And that meant death.

What do I do? A part of her felt that she was wasting her time. She had sunk as low as she was going to go. Where was the point in trying to fix things? Yet at the same time, it felt wrong to simply give up on her erstwhile companion. She couldn't make up her mind, and so she lingered.

The day was waning, and Yoko still hadn't come to a decision. She had returned to the gates several more times. There, she cornered traveler after traveler, asking the same questions and getting the same replies. She was at her wit's end and running out of time.

"Hey, you!" a voice called out from behind her.

Reflexively, Yoko began to move away, glancing warily over her shoulder. When she did she saw a mother and child standing a short distance away, looking at her strangely.

"It is you! We met you near Bakurou."

Yoko stopped, surprised, and turned back toward them. It was the woman and child who had found her on the mountain path, those many days ago—the sugar peddlers, still carrying their heavy pack-baskets on their backs.

"You made it! I'm glad, I wasn't sure . . ." the mother said, smiling, though there was more than mirth in her expression. The child looked plainly confused.

"And your wounds, they healed?"

Yoko hesitated before nodding. Then she bowed low. "Thank you. Thank you for helping me in the mountains."

They had offered her help, and she had brushed them away and fled, not daring to trust any stranger. She may have thanked them at the time, but Yoko didn't think she had really meant it then.

"Well, I really am glad to see that you're well. I was worried for you, out in the wilds all alone like that." The woman smiled easier now. "See, Kuyo? She's fine. There was nothing to worry about." The mother looked down at her daughter, who was clutching onto her leg. The girl was staring at Yoko as though she didn't fully believe what she was seeing. Yoko tried smiling at her. The muscles in her cheeks tensed, drawing up the corners of her mouth. It felt unnatural, unpracticed.

The girl named Kuyo blinked and hid behind her mother's leg, pouting. Yoko squatted down to the girl's level.

If they hadn't given me that water and that candy, would I have made it through the night?

This time Yoko's smile was a little brighter. "Thank you, too. You were the one who gave me the candy, weren't you?"

The girl looked up at Yoko, and then at her mother, and then smiled a little. Immediately, she frowned again, but then she couldn't hold back any longer and she grinned, showing her teeth. She was so young, so girlish, it made Yoko want to cry.

"Did it hurt?" asked the girl, smiling now.

"What?"

"Your cuts. Mama said you were grumpy because your cuts hurt."

"Yes, yes they did. She's right. And I'm sorry for being grumpy."

"They don't hurt no more?"

"No, I'm fine now." Yoko lifted one sleeve to show the scar where one of the demon-dog's claws had slashed her. As she did, she worried whether they would notice that the wound had healed far too quickly.

Kuyo looked up at her mother. "It is better, Mama!"

The mother narrowed her eyes and looked down at her daughter. "Well, I'm glad. I was going to go back out and look for you, but by the time I reached Bak, the gates were already closing, and guardsmen these days don't have the spine to go out after nightfall. So, were you looking for someone here?"

Yoko nodded. "My friend. A rat beastling."

"We were just heading into Goryou ourselves. Join us?"

Yoko had to shake her head *no*. The mother nodded, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Well, Kuyo, let's find our lodgings for the night." The woman took her daughter's hand, and then looked back up at Yoko. "Your friend's a beastling, you say?"

Yoko nodded.

"Well, he's either at the town office, or . . . out back. What's his name?"

"Rakushun . . ."

"Then you just stay here. I'll go take a look," she said lightly, resettling her basket on her back.

Yoko bowed her head. "Thank you. Again."

Near evening, the woman returned alone. She told Yoko that there was no one resembling her friend Rakushun among either the wounded or the dead. Then she hurried back to the gates, leaving Yoko to wonder whether the woman knew what had happened the other day, and who Yoko really was.

Yoko decided that it was time to give up searching for news of her friend. Either the sugar peddler had missed Rakushun, or the beastling had already left the town of Goryou.

And I've no way of finding out which it was.

Yoko hung her head where she stood on the highroad, still facing the gates in the distance.

This is my punishment. This not knowing. Not being able to throw it all away.

With a heavy heart, she turned and set out down the road alone.

Yoko quickly reverted to her old way of travel: she walked through the night, watchful for the denizens of darkness, and slept as dawn came over the land. She had spent so much time walking in the dark hours, she realized, that a part of her was convinced this whole country was a land of night where darkness was the norm and the harsh light of day no more than an unsettling dream.

Rakushun had carried all their money, so Yoko was penniless. Still, she was used to the routine battles with demons and sleeping hungry on a bed of grass, so she thought little of it. It was good enough to have an objective. She would go to Agan and then cross over to En. She lacked the money to hire a boat, but she had plenty of time to think about how to arrange that.

Yoko calculated as best she could and guessed that she had been on the highroad for more than a month since the old man in Takkyu had stolen her belongings. She knew that as she continued there would again be nothing to drink, nothing to eat, and only the power of the gem to keep her going. But because she knew, it was that much easier to bear.

The blue monkey never returned, and now that she had the scabbard, the sword no longer showed her visions of home. Occasionally, she would hear the faint, far-off sound of water dripping, and out of the corner of her eye she would notice a wan light spilling from the gap between the sword hilt and the scabbard, but she never drew the blade to look. Instead, she walked on in silence, her pace quickening.

So pitiful. Is your life really worth so much, hrmm?

She could hear the monkey's voice in her mind, taunting her in her brief moments of rest. It didn't surprise her. After all, it was only the voice of her own fears. She didn't need the creature's presence to hear that.

It is.

Worth enough to abandon the one who saved it?

I don't know. But I'm not going to give up.

Why don't you just turn yourself in, pay your dues? Pay for your sins . . .

I'll think about that once I get to En.

Yoko thought she could hear the sound of cackling far off in the distance.

You're just afraid to die, aren't you? You're afraid! Oh, you think your life's so important.

It is. Even more so because he saved it. And when I no longer need saving, when I no longer need protection, when my life is entirely my own, I'll think about how I'm going to live it. I'll worry about regrets, and repentance, then.

Right now, Yoko thought, *right now is for living.*

Yes, living. Living and killing. Slaughtering demons, threatening people with your gleaming sword. You like the look of fear in their eyes, don't you?

I only do what I have to do. I must go to En. I can't afford to wander. Once I'm there, I'll be able to lay down my sword.

Going to En won't solve everything!

Maybe not. But I have to look for Keiki, and I have to find a way home. And I have many things I need to think about.

Still think Keiki is your friend, hrmm?

I'll know that when I meet him again. I don't need to think about it until then.

Even if you do find him once more, you still won't be able to go home.

I won't give up until I know for sure.

Why go home at all? No one's waiting for you.

I don't care.

Yoko had lived for years—for all of her old life, it seemed—watching the faces of the people around her, searching for signs of what they wanted. Were they happy? Were they angry? Did they like her? How could she make them like her more? She'd spent her life afraid of confrontation, willing to do anything to avoid a scolding.

It's funny, thinking about it now. What was I so scared of?

It occurred to her that maybe she hadn't just been a coward. Maybe she was lazy. It was easier to just do what people wanted her to do rather than think for herself. It took too much energy to force her own will on others; it was much easier to go with the flow—much easier to act like the "good girl" and slowly wear away all the parts of herself that didn't fit.

She had been a lazy coward, then. More than anything else that was why she wanted to go home now. She would return to the world she knew, and she would live her life entirely differently this time. She wanted another chance.

Yoko turned these thoughts over in her mind as she strode silently through the unquiet nights.



The rain fell more frequently as the days wore on, and Yoko guessed that it was now the rainy season in the west of Kou. Camping outside became miserable, and she decided to look for places to stay in the villages that dotted the countryside. Some people were willing to let her sleep in their barns, while others asked for payment she didn't have. Sometimes, the more belligerent folk would call the village guards. Once, an entire

hamlet turned out to pursue her, and she was certain she would be stoned to death before she escaped. But sometimes she was invited in for a warm meal, often at the poorest of homes.

As her journey continued, Yoko learned how to work for her lodgings.

She would stay the night, then work for her hosts the following day. She learned how to perform many chores—she helped in the fields, cleaned houses, helped mend roofs, took care of livestock, and swept out barns. Once she even helped to dig a grave.

Sometimes the more prosperous folk would let her stay on for a few days earn a handful of coins. And thus Yoko moved from village to village, working when she could, drawing her sword and running when trouble loomed. She discovered that whenever a village called its guards against her, security would be tight at all the neighboring villages, and so she would camp out under the open sky until she reached an area where the people were less wary.

The demons came, too, and in increasingly greater numbers, but she barely paid them any attention at all. She fought, cleaned her sword, and moved on.

About a month into her journey, Yoko was walking down a rural road when she heard a noise behind her and looked back to find that she was being pursued by a group of men, village guards from a place she had already left far behind. Whenever she stopped in a village and met people there, she left a trail; perhaps it was unsurprising that somebody had picked up that trail and caught up to her.

She fled into the mountains, losing her hunters in the trees and underbrush; but in the days that followed, she encountered more and more guards walking the highroad, and increasingly, she was forced to stay off the roadways and instead travel through open country.

Her worst fear was that Agan would be closed to her, so as she neared her destination, she avoided staying in villages or speaking with anyone on the road. Eventually, she gave up the road altogether and chose her paths carefully through the mountains, determinedly pushing onward.

Rakushun had said it would take a single month to reach Agan, but almost two months had passed before Yoko caught her first sight of the bustling port town.



"Excuse me," Yoko said, stopping another traveler in front of the gates of Agan.

The town lay at the bottom of a long, gentle slope. From the vantage point of the highroad, you could see the entire harbor.

The Blue Sea was indeed brilliantly blue, cut here and there by the white ridges of waves cresting and breaking on the shore. It was breathtaking: the translucent sea, the curve of the peninsula that sheltered the port, the white sails of ships in the harbor. Beyond the peninsula, the perfectly flat line of the horizon divided the distance into sea and sky. If this world was truly flat, something didn't make sense there.

The many roads leading up to Agan's front gates were all busy. It was a large town with a lot of traffic. Yoko had slipped into a crowd of what appeared to be locals and called out to the first kind-looking person she found.

"Excuse me, but would you happen to know how I might get a ship to En?"

The elderly man politely told her the way. She asked how to secure passage and how much it would cost. The money she had made on the trip here would be just enough.

"When does the ship leave?"

"There's a passenger vessel every five days. Three more days until the next."

Yoko asked what time of day the boat left. If she made a mistake, and the harbor was closed, all would be for nothing. She asked every useful question she could think of, then bowed her head in gratitude.

Turning her back on Agan, Yoko spent the rest of that day, and the next, in the nearby mountains. The day before the ship's departure, she ventured to the town gates once again.

The guard at the gates was tight. She had to spend the night in town, however, and she couldn't afford raising suspicions. Yoko glanced down at her sword, wrapped in its bundle of cloth. Even though she now had her scabbard, travelers wearing swords were few and far between, and she didn't want to draw unnecessary attention to herself.

How much easier things would have been if only she didn't have the sword! For that reason she had considered leaving it in Kou, but that would leave her defenseless against demon

attacks. And it wasn't as though swords were outlawed here—only kaikyaku.

An idea striking her, Yoko went back into the mountains and cut several sheaves of grass, wrapping them around the blade. Then she put the disguised weapon together with her other belongings and wrapped it all in a large bundle, concealing the sword completely. Carrying the bundle in her arms, she went back down to the highroad as dusk was coming on and squatted by the roadside, awaiting her chance.

As soon as she reached the road, a middle-aged man called out to her.

"Something the matter, son?"

"Ah, it's nothing," she replied, making her voice as deep as she could. "Just hurt my leg on the road."

The man looked at her suspiciously, then hurried on his way toward Agan. Yoko, still sitting, watched him leave. Three more people called out to her before she found the ones she was waiting for.

"Is something the matter?"

It was a young couple, leading two small children.

"I . . . I don't feel well . . ." Yoko said, looking down at the road.

The woman put her hand on Yoko's shoulder. "Can you walk?"

Yoko shook her head. If she couldn't win this woman's sympathy, she would be forced to abandon her sword, leaving herself vulnerable. Her nervousness about that aided her performance, as a trickle of cold sweat ran down her forehead.

"You don't look well. Say, you're almost to Agan. Can you walk that far?"

Yoko nodded weakly. The man took her by the shoulder. "There, grab onto my arm. Just a little walk and we're there."

Yoko nodded, resting a hand on the man's shoulder. As she stood, she dropped her bag—on purpose. She went to pick it up, but the woman stopped her, grabbed it herself, and turned to her children. "Here, you carry this. It's light."

The two kids picked up Yoko's bundle and nodded, the serious cast to their faces showing their concern.

"You can walk? Shall we call the guards?"

Yoko shook her head. "No, I'll be fine. My friend went in to find lodgings for me already."

"I see." The man smiled. "Good to hear you've a friend waiting for you."

Yoko nodded and began to walk, leaning lightly on the man's shoulder for support; lightly, so he wouldn't think her too gravely ill, yet close enough so passersby might think they had traveled together.

They neared the gates, where several guards moved back and forth amid the stream of travelers, checking travel papers at random and observing the crowd. Yoko and the family walked right past them. She felt the eyes of one of the guards rest on her momentarily, but the outcry she feared never came. Carefully keeping right between the young couple, Yoko passed through the gates of Agan.

After they had walked a little farther, Yoko let herself breathe a sigh of relief at last. She glanced back over her shoulder,

making sure that the guards at the gates were far enough away they could not possibly recognize her.

I made it. Relief spread through her, and she took her arm off the man's shoulder.

"Thank you, sir. I should be fine from here."

"You're sure? We can take you to your lodgings."

"No. No, thanks; I'll be fine. Really. Thank you very much." Yoko bowed her head. *I'm sorry for the deception.*

The couple exchanged looks, then wished her well and went on their way.

Like Takkyu, the town of Agan was packed with refugees. Fearing that the staff at any of the lodgings might suspect her, Yoko spent the night squatting in an abandoned corner near the town's outer walls.

When morning finally arrived, she rose stiffly and made her way along the muddy streets, heading toward the harbor. Closer to the water, the streets widened. Yoko stopped when she saw a simple wooden pier with a line of people embarking on a vessel moored at its end. Several of the town guards were overseeing the process, checking all the passengers as they came to board.

For a moment, Yoko's vision dimmed. In a daze, she watched as the guards opened up each passenger's belongings, searching them. Yoko had an idea what they were looking for, but she didn't want to throw away the sword if she could possibly avoid it. She edged closer to the pier, standing in the shadow of a

low wall. She dared go no closer. From there, she watched the passengers and the guards.

Should I throw away the sword?

Even losing her only means of protecting herself was better than being stuck here in Kou. It was the only way, she decided, and she turned toward the water—but for some reason she just couldn't do it. The sword was the only thing tying her to Keiki. Losing it would mean losing her only connection to him—her only connection to home.

What do I do?

Yoko wavered, unable to make up her mind.

She scanned the harbor. There had to be some way to get to En without losing the sword. She saw a number of sailboats moored in the bay. Maybe she could steal one.

I don't know how to sail.

Rakushun had said that the Blue Sea was an inland sea. Was there some way she could walk along its shoreline all the way around to the border of En?

She was still standing there, flushed with indecision, when she heard the beating of a large drum.

Yoko's eyes darted out to the end of the pier. The sound was coming from onboard the ship; the crew was making ready to set sail. The line of passengers had already finished embarking. The guards were still there, but just standing around, their morning's work done.

I won't make it.

If she ran for the ship now, the guards would catch her. She didn't have time to undo her bundle and take out the sword, and

it would be suspicious if she tried to board a ship with no bags at all. Yoko stood frozen, as though rooted to the ground, as the vessel slowly raised its sails.

The gangplank leading to the deck of the ship was removed. Finally, Yoko left the shadow of the wall and ran. The ship had begun to make way; it was moving past the pier, and the guards stood there, watching it. Yoko stopped abruptly. She couldn't risk getting any closer.

In a daze, Yoko watched the boat slowly pull away. The image of its large white sails burned into her mind.

If I go now, I could jump into the sea, swim to the boat . . . Yoko stood, thinking wild thoughts, but her body would not move. *If I can only get on that ship, I can go to En!*

All she could do was stand there clutching her bag, watching the boat leave. She felt numb, unable to believe she had missed what might have been her only chance.

"What's the matter? Missed your boat?"

The sudden voice brought Yoko back to her senses.

Below her, on the other side of a seawall of hard packed earth and wooden planks, she saw a small boat with four men standing on its deck. One of them was looking up at her.

Yoko nodded, her face turned away to hide her frustration. It would be five more days before the next boat for En came. Those five days would determine her fate.

"Well, jump down, son. Get on."

She stood for a moment, unable to comprehend what the man was saying.

"You're in a hurry, aren't you?"

Yoko nodded. The man was holding on to a hawser rope that was attached to one of the posts by her feet.

"Well then—undo that rope and jump down. We'll catch up to the transport ship at Fugou. And you can help out a bit on deck in the meantime."

The other men on the boat laughed at this. Again Yoko nodded, slowly, wondering if she was wrong to dare trust them. Then, untying the hawser, she clutched it tightly in her hand and jumped down onto the boat.

The little boat was a trading vessel, carrying goods to the island of Fugou, which lay in the Blue Sea to the north of Agan. Fugou was the northernmost district of Kou, a full day and night's journey out from Agan town, and the last port on the way to En.

With the exception of a brief ferry ride she had taken on a school trip many years before, Yoko had never ridden on a boat, let alone a boat with a sail.

She walked the decks in a perpetual state of confusion, yanking ropes and lugging nautical paraphernalia as she was instructed. The ship's mate worked her hard. Once the boat had entered deeper waters and the sailing got smoother, Yoko was made to scrub pots and prepare food for the crew. By the end of the trip, she'd even washed one old crewman's feet for him, and the men on the ship had taken to calling her the silent monk, for she never responded to their jibes and never took off her hooded kimono. She was grateful they didn't press any further.

The boat coursed smoothly through the waves all day and all night, and by the next morning they had arrived at the harbor in Fugou.

The boat for En had reached the harbor just before them and now sat quietly moored. The trader's crew made Yoko scrub and clean until the last minute, when they drew up alongside the passenger ship as it lay at anchor a short distance from shore. The trader's mate hailed the ship, asking them to take on Yoko. A moment later Yoko found herself clambering up a small ladder lowered from the larger vessel. When she had reached the deck, one of the men from the trader threw her a small package.

"Steamed bread. You'll need something to eat," he said, waving to her.

Clutching the package tightly in one arm, Yoko waved in reply. "Thank you."

"Nah, thanks for the work. Take care."

The men laughed and pulled away the floats that kept the two boats from bumping into each other—Yoko had been the one to set them in the water before she crossed to the other ship—then waved again. They were the last people she was to meet in Kou.

Although it was an inland sea, the Blue Sea was so vast that the far shore could not be seen, and the smell of the brine as Yoko stood on the deck made it seem like any other ocean. The boat

left the harbor at Fugou and made its way across the bright blue water, heading for the town of Ugou on the En shore. The trip from Fugou lasted three days and two nights of smooth sailing.

At first glance, Yoko thought En seemed little different from what she had seen of the western shore of Kou. As the boat neared the port, however, she began to notice differences. The harbor here was much larger, with many more piers, and in much better repair. Behind it sprawled a giant town—a city, really—larger than any she had seen in Kou. It was rather like a seaside town in Japan, save for the lack of any concrete. Evidently some of the other travelers gathered on deck were also seeing Ugou for the first time, for they stood like Yoko, eyes wide, drinking in the sights.

The town of Ugou began at the harbor and ran back to a U-shaped wall that marked its inland limits. Like Agan, the town was built on a slope, leading up to a mountain that rose on the far side of the town walls. The bright pastel colors of the painted wooden buildings blended together at a distance, giving the whole town a rosy hue. Around the edges, and here and there toward the middle, she saw taller buildings that appeared to be made of stone. One of them was clearly a watchtower, another thing she had never seen in Kou.

Yoko's eyes were wide. The well-kept harbor here made the one in Agan look like a hovel. The piers were bustling with activity. A small forest of ships' masts crowded the water. Here and there, billowing sails of white and light brown made a pleasant contrast with the blue of the sea.

Free from the poverty and danger of Kou, Yoko felt as though she'd never seen anything so beautiful in her entire life.

Off the boat, Yoko found herself in the midst of a beehive of activity. Busy-looking men swarmed the docks. Children sped to and fro, running errands. The cries of food vendors lifted above the noise of the crowd, adding a rhythm to the cheerful cacophony. It was like a giant festival.

Yoko's first thought upon looking at the folk in the crowd was that this would be a wonderful place to live. It was energizing to see the faces of the people so fresh and alive, and she guessed that hers must look the same way.

She was walking along the pier, absorbed in the bustle of this new land, when she heard a very familiar voice call out behind her. "Yoko?"

She jumped and whirled around to see a familiar figure, short and sleek in grayish brown fur. It was Rakushun, his whiskers shining silvery in the noontime sun.

"Rakushun . . ."

The beastling pushed his way through the crowd until he stood at Yoko's feet. His small pink paws wrapped around Yoko's hands. "So glad you made it. So glad."

"How did you . . . ?"

"Well, I figured if you got on the boat at Agan, you'd be coming here. So I waited."

"You waited for me?"

Rakushun nodded, then tugged on Yoko's hand. "I waited a while in Agan, but since you didn't show up, I thought maybe you had gone over before me. But then when I got here, I couldn't find you on this side either. So I've been coming down to the shore whenever the boats come in. I was just about to give up, to tell the truth," the rat admitted, smiling up at Yoko.

"Why . . . why did you wait for me so long?"

Rakushun hunched his shoulders. "I was foolish. I should have given you some sen, or at least had you carry half. You must have had a hard time coming all this way. Sorry, eh?"

"But I was the one who ran off! I abandoned you!"

"Yeah, wasn't much help there, was I?" The rat gave her a sheepish grin. "You were right to run. What would you have done if the guards came and caught you? I would've told you to do just what you did, and even given you my coin purse, if I hadn't been, er . . . out cold."

"Rakushun . . ."

"Anyway, after that, I was all worried 'bout what had happened to you. I'm glad you're well."

"It wasn't easy, leaving you there like that."

"I'd hope not!"

"Yes. I'll admit it, I was scared to travel with another person. I-I couldn't trust anyone. I thought everyone was my enemy."

Rakushun stroked his whiskers. "And now, am I your enemy?"

Yoko shook her head.

"Well, no problem then. Let's go."

"Rakushun," Yoko called out to him, "aren't you angry? I feel like I betrayed you."

"Oh, you might be a little slow in the head, but I don't hate you for that, Yoko," Rakushun said with a smile.

"I . . . I even thought . . . I should go back and finish you off. To keep you from talking."

Rakushun pulled away his paw and stopped walking. "Er, Yoko . . ."

She swallowed. "Yes?"

"To tell the truth, when you left me there, yes, I was a little disappointed. Just a little. I knew you didn't trust me. You were nervous the whole time we'd been together, wondering if I was going to do something to you.

"Still, I said to meself, 'Rakushun, give her space, and she'll get over it.' So, yes, it was a disappointment, but it seems like you've got things figured out now. So, there's not really a problem then, okay?"

"But there is," Yoko protested. "I mean, why stick around? Why bother with me at all after that?"

"Well, I always do as I see fit. I wanted you to trust me—that's my problem. And whether you would trust me or not, well, that was your decision. Who am I to know whether you stood to gain or to lose by trusting the likes of me? That, too, is your decision."

Yoko nodded slowly. "Rakushun, you're really . . ."

Rakushun grinned. "Don't mention it."

"No. I was so quick to give up. I thought I had no friends."

"Yoko." A small paw tugged on Yoko's arm.

"It's just, I'm so ashamed . . ."

"You shouldn't be."

"I should."

"You shouldn't, Yoko. Hey, it's not like *I* was dumped in some foreign land, chased around, and knocked about every way I turned."

Yoko looked down at Rakushun's face staring up at her.

The beastling smiled. "You did good, Yoko. You're going to do better."

"Huh?"

"I could tell as soon as I saw you jump off the boat. You have this . . . aura. You're hard not to notice."

"Me?"

"Aye. Now, let's be off."

"Right. But where to?"

"To the town offices. If you register as a kaikyaku, it'll make things easier for you on the road. They might even write you a letter of introduction, if you mention you are seeking an audience. While I was waiting for you to arrive, I wandered around a bit, see. Went to the town offices, among other things. They're the ones that told me 'bout that."

"Wow . . . thanks," Yoko said.

Until that moment this world had felt like a cage to her; but suddenly, she thought she could hear a rattling of the bars. The door was opening.

The two friends headed up into the middle of town. Ugou was even livelier away from the docks. People were out in the streets

in great numbers, and shopkeepers called from their storefronts, beckoning customers inside.

"Quite the difference from Kou, eh?"

"No kidding."

"I'd heard meself that En was a rich country, but hearing and seeing are two different things."

Yoko nodded. The streets here were wider, the scale of everything bigger. Even the wall around the town was thick, perhaps as much as twenty feet wide in places; numerous shops had been carved into the inner side of the wall itself. It reminded Yoko of the restaurants built under the elevated train lines in Tokyo.

Most of the buildings were wooden and three stories in height. Every window had glass, and even from the outside it was evident that the ceilings were high and the rooms spacious. Here and there she saw larger buildings of brick and stone, giving the city a very different feel from the Chinatown-like warrens she had visited in Kou.

The streets were not dirt, but paved with cobblestones, and troughs for sewage ran on either side. There was even a park and a central square. It was Yoko's first time seeing anything of the sort in this world.

"It feels like I've been living in the countryside my whole life and this is my first trip to the big city," Yoko remarked as she looked around.

Rakushun laughed. "I thought much the same when I arrived. Of course, I really did grow up in the countryside."

"And the town walls—there's more than one layer."

"Eh?"

Yoko pointed at a series of high stone walls that were visible above the rooftops; they appeared to form several concentric rings of defenses within the outer walls of the town.

"Oh, those. Actually, the outermost wall is what they call the perimeter wall. Those others inside the town are called the town walls here. Most places in Kou don't have those. They're an added protection against attack. Still, I wonder if those inner walls aren't really just perimeter walls that the town outgrew."

"Right . . . so they had to build other walls farther out."

There were some refugees from Kei living in the square and beneath the town walls in little tents, but their gatherings seemed orderly compared to those Yoko had seen elsewhere. Rakushun thought that the town might be providing the tents.

"Is Ugou a provincial capital?"

"No," replied Rakushun, "a territorial capital."

"Oh, and a territory was one below a province, right?"

"Nope. Two below. You got your villages and towns at the bottom, then your townships come next, then districts, prefectures, territories, regions, and finally provinces."

"And how many regions in a province?"

"Well, that depends on the province, don't it?"

"So, if this is just a territorial capital, then the regional and provincial capitals must be even bigger!" Yoko exclaimed. She felt as though she were finally getting the hang of the myriad political divisions in this world, even though her head was spinning. "But why are En and Kou so different?"

Rakushun smiled wryly. "Better king, better kingdom."

"Better?" she said, looking around. Rakushun nodded.

"The Ever-King of En is supposed to be a genius at administration, the best in a long time. He's been in power for a good five hundred years by now. Nothing like our fledgling Naze-King, who's ruled for a mere fifty years."

Yoko blinked. "Five . . . hundred years?"

"Aye. The only one who has reigned for longer is the Priest-King of Sou. Basically, the longer the reign, the better the king. Word has it that Sou's a rich and prosperous kingdom."

"One king for five hundred years?"

"Why, sure. The king *is* a god, after all. You thought he was human? No, the powers of Heaven only grant a kingdom to one who is worthy of the charge. And the kingdom prospers or falters according to his worth."

"Wow," Yoko murmured, amazed.

"See, when a king's reign ends, there's always trouble with the succession. That's why kingdoms with a wise, enduring king grow fat. The Ever-King, in particular, is said to have a deft hand when it comes to ruling. He's made many important reforms. The Priest-King's got a good reputation too, but the difference is that Sou is known for peace and tranquility, whereas En is known for getting things done."

"Well, it sure is lively here."

"That's right! Ah," said Rakushun, gesturing toward the building ahead of them. "There's the offices."

Yoko looked up to see a large, ornate edifice made of brick. The decorations on its walls and under its eaves were unmistakably

Chinese in style, but the structure itself seemed very Western. When they entered through the front door Yoko saw that the inside of the building also maintained a mix of Western and Chinese architectural elements.

When at last they stepped outside again, the first word that Yoko said was "Amazing!"

Rakushun nodded vigorously. "Indeed! I know they're harsh on kaikyaku in Kou, but what a difference, eh?"

Yoko nodded too, holding up the wooden chop she had received from the office. On the front was a seal, and the words "By Permission of the Offices of Ugou, Suyou Region, Hak Territory, Khei Province" inked black in tightly spaced characters:

景州白郡首陽郷烏号官許

On the back was written Yoko's name. This was her identification.

The procedure had been astonishingly painless. Once inside the regional offices, they had been called before a minor official. He had taken Yoko's name and asked her for her address and employment in Japan. To her surprise, he'd even asked for her postal code and area code. When she had answered all his questions, she received the chop.

"Er, Yoko, say, I was wondering . . ." Rakushun's voice sounded at her elbow. "What exactly is a postal code? And an area code?"

Her companion had asked the official the same question, but the man had apparently not known the answer. He had

merely replied that it was standard procedure to ask, that the information was required by the rules laid out in his official policy manual. Yoko had glanced at this book as the man opened it, and discovered that it had been printed on some sort of woodblock press. The official had referred to the manual several times before issuing her identification.

"Well," Yoko explained, "a postal code is something you add to an address when you want to send a letter. And the area code is something you use when you call someone on the telephone."

"Er, tele-what?"

"Um . . . it's something you use when you want to talk to someone at a distance."

"Sorcery! They have things like that in Wa? And anyone can use them? Amazing!" Rakushun stroked his whiskers bemusedly. "But what good does it do that official, asking you 'bout such things?"

"Maybe it's because no one would know what those codes are unless they really were from Wa. Now he knows for certain I'm a kaikyaku. I suppose if the government didn't check up on people who claim they're from my world, you could have a lot of impostors running around." Yoko laughed, holding up her chop.

"You may be right."

Yoko had been told that she could only use her new identification for three years. In that time, she would have to decide how she was to make her livelihood, choose a place to live, and start a family register, which was a more standard

document that made you a citizen of the kingdom. In the meantime, for those three years, she could use the public schools and hospitals of En without paying. Better still, she could bring her identification to a place called the *kaisheen*, which was something like a bank, and they would give her a small allowance to live on.

"What an amazing place!"

"You're telling me."

How poor was Kou and how rich En. The chop hanging around her neck said it all.

Seeing the Ever-King, too, would pose little difficulty now, Yoko thought. Rakushun assured her that she ought to ask the ruler for aid, though she was not certain what else she could possibly expect to receive. She found that she could breathe easy at last. The fear of persecution was gone.

As Rakushun had suggested, beastlings were not uncommon in En. For Yoko, seeing animals walking on two legs among the city crowds was almost comical. Some of them also wore human clothes, which looked even funnier. Yoko often had the impression she was at some sort of wild carnival, with the people walking around her as the main attraction.

Rakushun had found work in the harbor while he was waiting for Yoko to arrive. Although he had simply been helping carry loads from ships at the docks up into town, he spoke of it as though it were the most delightful job in the world.

It was the first job he had ever held. Nonetheless, he quit when Yoko arrived. She suggested that they could stay in Ugou if he wanted to work a bit longer, but he wouldn't hear of it. "Besides," he said, "I told them I only wanted work while I was waiting for a friend; there will be no hard feelings if I leave—they're expecting it."

On the day after Yoko's ship came in, the two friends left Ugou on the road to Kankyu. Yoko had received her first allowance from the kaisheen, and while it wasn't a great sum of money, it was more than adequate for living expenses, so the trip was relatively easy. They walked along the highroad during the day and at night entered the nearest town to find lodgings. The towns in En all appeared to be quite large, and the prices for room and board were reasonable. For the same amount of money they had spent for a dismal room in Kou, they could sleep quite comfortably here. Each night, after finding a place to stay, they would walk around town to see the sights. Rakushun in particular enjoyed poking around in the local shops.

The journey was quite pleasant. No one seemed to be following Yoko, though it took her a while to put aside the fear of pursuit and stop worrying when she saw a guardsman approach. She never ventured out of the towns at night, so she wasn't certain, but from the talk on the streets, it sounded as though demons appeared only rarely in this part of the world.

One evening, while Yoko was taking a bath, Rakushun was out talking to people on the street and heard rumor of another

kaikyaku nearby. It was their eleventh day out of Ugou, and they were more than a third of the way to their destination of Kankyu.

Though Rakushun had suggested that Yoko could dress more brightly now that they were in En, she still wore her men's clothes—the kimono-like robe that she had learned was properly called a *hoh;* she saw no point in changing. The hoh was easy to move in, and she was reluctant to wear one of the long-hemmed women's kimonos she had seen.

Because of her attire, Yoko was continually mistaken for a young boy, and though most of the lodgings at which they stayed had baths, the men's and women's were segregated, and awkward situations sometimes arose when she wanted to enter the women's section. So, she had hot water brought to her own room. Since they had no lack of travel funds, the two friends made sure to get decent rooms, including a private washing basin. Still, Yoko would have preferred the larger public baths, and she felt badly for having to kick Rakushun out of the room every time she bathed.

On this particular evening, Yoko washed her long, ragged locks in a basin full of hot water, thinking of all the trouble her hair had caused her. Takkee had dyed it soon after Yoko arrived in this world, but months had passed since then, and it was much longer now.

She had often sought out the same roots that Takkee had plucked from her garden to make the dye for her hair, but it had never gone as well as she had hoped, and the parts that were newly dyed lost their color quickly when she washed

them. Gradually her hair had reverted closer and closer to its original red, the brilliant color that had startled her so much at first. Now, however, she had become quite accustomed to seeing it. It was still odd for her to look at herself in a mirror, but she found that over time she had grown able to bear it. And so she washed and scrubbed and changed her clothes, all the while realizing how accustomed she was becoming to life in this world.

A while later, Rakushun returned.

"There's a large town up ahead by the name of Houryou," he said, "and they say there's a kaikyaku living there."

Yoko lifted her eyes for a moment, then looked at the floor. "Oh, really."

She didn't feel particularly excited about crossing paths with this person, whoever it was. She had nothing against meeting another kaikyaku, but somehow she felt spending time with a fellow soul from her old world would only make it harder for her to forget all she had lost.

"They call him Wallfaller."

"Wall . . . faller?"

"Aye. Teaches at a lecture hall, I hear."

What an odd name, thought Yoko. *Perhaps it's my unseen translator supplying meaning for some local turn of phrase—at least it doesn't sound like it's Seizo.* She realized she had been worrying that it might be the mournful, thieving old man, even though the chances were rather slim. Still it was a relief.

"Well, let's go see him!" Rakushun said, looking innocently at Yoko.

"I suppose we should."

"Of course we should!"

"Yes, you're right."

The following day, they left the road for Kankyu and made their way toward Houryou.

Apparently, the man they sought was living on the grounds of a large boarding school. Rakushun was concerned that it might be improper for them to disturb him by showing up unannounced, so he sent a letter ahead to request a formal meeting.

The next morning a reply from Wallfaller—Yoko noted that he signed the letter "Wall"—arrived at their lodgings, and the man who brought the message offered to guide them to the school.

The school in Houryou was inside the town walls. The school's construction was in the traditional Chinese style, built around a luxurious garden, making the place look less like a school and more like the mansion of an aristocrat.

The two friends were taken to a small gazebo-like building, where they were told to make themselves comfortable. Before long the man known as Wallfaller arrived.

"Thank you for waiting. I am Wall."

It was hard to guess the man's age. Yoko thought he was somewhere between thirty and fifty. He seemed young, yet at the same time he gave an impression of wisdom. He wore an easy smile on his face, and he was certainly very different from Seizo Matsuyama.

"Which of you sent me the letter?"

Rakushun stood. "Er, 'twas me, er, meself, sir. Thank you very much for your time."

Wall smiled broadly. "Please, sit down."

"Er . . . Right!" Rakushun said, scratching nervously under his ear, then turned toward Yoko. "She's a kaikyaku."

The man raised an eyebrow. "Ah, I see. However, she does not look much like a kaikyaku, does she?" He looked inquiringly at Yoko.

"I . . . I don't?"

The man laughed. "I certainly never saw hair that color in Japan."

Yoko saw the question in the man's eyes, and she launched into an explanation of how she had arrived in this world, and how she had found herself changed. Not only the color of her hair, but her face, her body, even her voice were different. When she finished, Wall nodded knowingly.

"Then you are most likely a *taika*."

"Me? A *taika?*" Yoko's eyes opened wide.

"When a shoku strikes, the Over Here and the Over There become mixed, mingled. Kaikyaku come, and eggfruit leave."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Occasionally, a shoku will carry people from Over There to this world. Conversely, eggfruit—what you might think of as embryos—are taken from here and sent to the other world. Fascinatingly enough, the eggfruit that do shift worlds end up in a mother's womb when they arrive. The ones who are born this way are known here as taika—which, incidentally,

literally means *fruit of the womb.* In other words, from eggfruit, wombfruit."

"And I'm one of these?"

Wall nodded. "Taika are originally of this world. The form that you have now is the one given to you by the Emperor of Heaven when you were conceived."

"So, when I was Over There . . ."

"Well, if you were born looking like this in Wa, it would cause quite a commotion, wouldn't it? I would assume that at your birth you were shaped to look much like your parents."

"Yes. My father always said I looked like his mother."

"So. The form your body took Over There is what we might call your *shell.* Like a covering placed over you while still in the womb, to protect you once you are born in a place where your natural form would make you seem a stranger. As long as you remained in that world, your inner self would bend to adapt to its new shape."

It took Yoko a long time to accept what he was saying. If it was true, then she wasn't even part of the world that she grew up in. She had been a stranger in that world, too. The idea went against all she had been taught in her childhood—and yet, at the same time, she felt a part of her had known all along.

That's why I never fit in.

Suddenly, the pain she had been carrying inside her since she first saw the visions in the sword disappeared. The pain was gone; but in its place, she was left with a profound sadness.

Yoko thought for a while about this world, and about the world she had left behind, and then she turned to Wall once more.

"Are you a taika too, then?"

The schoolteacher shook his head and laughed. "I'm an ordinary kaikyaku. I was born in Shizuoka Prefecture. Went to Tokyo University. Came here when I was twenty-two years old. I was trying to get out of the Yasuda lecture hall, crawled under a desk, and slipped through to this world."

"I'm sorry, the Yasuda lecture hall?" asked Yoko, afraid she was revealing her ignorance of something she should know about.

"Ah, I suppose it was before your time. It was a student protest. Well, we thought of it as a revolution. Quite the affair, it was, at least in our minds. Perhaps it didn't make the history books, though."

"I, uh . . . I'm not terribly good with history."

"Neither am I. But I do remember that day: January 17, 1969. Night had just fallen."

"That was before I was born."

Wall smiled. "Has it been that long? I didn't realize how much time I'd spent Over Here."

"So, you've been in this world ever since then?"

"That's right. I first arrived in Kei. I moved around, eventually coming to En, and finally settled down at this school six years ago. I teach what passes for biology here." He laughed and shook his head. "But I'm sure that's not what you've come to discuss. How can I help you?"

Yoko asked the one question that filled her mind. "Is there any way to get home?"

Wall paused and then said in a low voice, "No one can cross the Kyokai. The path between Over There and here goes one way only. You can come, but you can never leave."

Yoko sighed unhappily, though the answer did not surprise her.

"I'm sorry I couldn't help you."

"Thank you, anyhow. I was afraid that was true. But there is . . . another thing . . . I've been wondering about. Might I ask you?"

"Of course."

"I . . . I understand the language here. Why?"

Wall raised an eyebrow.

"Actually, at first, I didn't even realize they were speaking a different language," Yoko explained. "I thought it was Japanese all along. The only words I didn't understand were local words for things we don't have back home. But, when I was in Kou, I met an old man, another kaikyaku. He was the one who told me the people around me weren't speaking Japanese. I was hoping you could tell me what it means."

Wall sat silently, thinking. Then he chuckled, and looked into Yoko's eyes. "My dear, it appears that you are not human."

Also not a surprise, thought Yoko, recalling her strange dreams.

"When I first arrived here, the language gave me great difficulty," Wall went on. "I'm pretty sure it's loosely related to Chinese, but the basic Mandarin that I knew was useless.

For years I lived by writing down what I wanted to say. They use mostly Chinese characters here, so I could get my meaning across. Of course, my Chinese writing isn't very good either, so for the first year or so things were difficult. It's the same for everyone who comes—it's no different for the taika, either; I've done some research into kaikyaku, you see. But I've never heard of someone who came here already understanding the language. I have a feeling you're not the usual sort of kaikyaku."

Yoko put a hand to her chest and took a deep breath.

Wall continued. "I've heard that demons and wizards have the ability to speak in tongues and understand all that is said in any language. If it's true that you never had difficulty speaking with the people here, then I would say you're no ordinary human. You're either fey or fell, or something along those lines."

"Can . . . demons become taika, too?"

Wall nodded, still smiling. "I've never heard of it, but it's certainly possible. Of course, this means that you may indeed be able to go home after all."

Yoko lifted her head. "Really?"

"Yes. Demonkin and wizards *are* able to cross the Kyokai. I cannot. I will never return to the world where we were born. But I cannot say the same for you. You should seek an audience with the Ever-King."

"Do you think he'll help me?"

"He very well may. Securing an audience won't be easy, but I think it's worth making the effort."

"Yes, thank you." Yoko nodded and looked down at the floor. "So, I'm not human. I had wondered." Yoko chuckled.

"Yoko," Rakushun said, his voice stern.

Yoko pulled back her sleeve and held out her right hand. "I thought it was strange. I was wounded in this palm very badly. It was a wound I received from a demon, after coming here. The cut went clean through my hand, very deep, but now it's barely visible."

Rakushun looked at Yoko's outstretched palm and began to stroke his whiskers. He was the one who had tended to that wound. He was a witness; he could attest to its severity.

"It's not just this one—I've been wounded all over. Yet all of the scars are now so faded I can hardly tell where they were. And even when I first got them, the wounds seemed too light to have come from the monstrous things that were attacking me. They would bite through my hand, and only leave a trace of fang marks. It seems like I've become resistant to injury somehow."

Yoko laughed. For some reason Wall's confirmation of her suspicions about herself made her giddy. "It was all because I'm—what was the word you used?—*fey*. I suppose that's why all the demons were after me, too."

"After you?" the teacher asked, his brows furrowed.

It was Rakushun who answered. "It's true."

"Unbelievable! But that's unprecedented."

"Aye. I thought so too, but sure as rain, where Yoko goes, the demons follow. Why, I was there when a bunch of kochou attacked us."

Wall rested his forehead in his hands. "I'd heard rumors of frequent demon sightings in Kou of late . . . are you saying that was because of her?"

Rakushun winced, looking at Yoko, but she nodded. "It may be," she said. "After all, it was a kochou that chased me into this world in the first place."

"A kochou chased you here? You mean from Over There? Across the Kyokai?"

"Yes. There was a man, named Keiki . . . I suppose he was a demon, too. He told me I had to come here, for my protection. He was the one who brought me over."

"And where is he now?"

"That's what I don't know. As soon as I arrived on this side, we were ambushed by demons and separated. I haven't seen him since; he may not even be alive."

Wall sat a long while, holding his head in his hands. "It's just impossible. I don't know what to think of it."

"That's what Rakushun said, too."

"Demons . . . are like wild beasts. They may form packs and attack humans, but it makes no sense to think that they would purposely attack a particular person—and even more ridiculous to think of a demon crossing the Kyokai for the express purpose of attacking you. It's just not something they would be *capable* of doing. They're like tigers. Dangerous, yes, but not malicious."

"But, can't tigers be trained? Maybe it's something like that?"

"I can't imagine that anyone could do that with a demon. No, this is something far larger, Yoko."

"What do you mean?"

"If the demons have changed somehow, or if they were forced to attack you—if someone has truly learned the art of manipulating demons—then we must investigate the matter thoroughly. A power that can wield the demons as a weapon would be a terrible threat. At worst, it could destroy the kingdom."

Wall looked at Yoko. "Now, if you are fey, there may be another explanation for what was happening to you. Although I've never heard of feuds between demonkin, a demon, when starving, will practice cannibalism; perhaps something about your true nature could attract their hunger. Still . . ."

"I wonder," said Rakushun. "Yoko sure doesn't *look* like a demon."

Wall nodded. "There are some demons who can take human form, but not so perfectly. And, of course, if she were a demon, she probably would have realized it by now."

"I realized something was going on," Yoko told him, smiling ruefully.

Wall shook his head. "No. I believe that you're something quite different—not a demon at all." He stood. "You must meet with the king. I could petition the court on your behalf, but I think it would be quicker if you went directly to Kankyu. Go to Shadowlore Palace immediately and tell the court officials what you have just told me. You are the key to what's going on. The king will surely grant you your audience."

Yoko also stood. She bowed deeply. "Thank you so much."

"If you leave now, you can reach the next town by nightfall. Your luggage, is it at your lodgings?"

"No, we've brought all we have with us."

"Then I'll see you to the town gates."

Wall walked with them along the road that led to the edge of town. "Though it's not much, I will send along a petition pleading your case," he said. "You may not be able to leave the capital until the king and his advisors figure out what's going on, but I'm sure the Ever-King will help you get home once these matters are cleared up."

Yoko looked at the man. "And you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Won't you ask the king to help you go home, too?"

Wall smiled bitterly. "I lack the status to see the king. He hasn't the time to meet with every mere kaikyaku who wants something or other, you know."

"But, I could—"

"No . . . No. To tell the truth, I very well might have been able to get an audience. I just didn't want one."

"Didn't want one?"

"I was tired back in Japan. Tired of the times, of what was happening. I was actually rather happy to find myself in a different world. Now, I don't want to go home. By the time it occurred to me that the king might have the means to send me back, I'd already grown so set in my ways here that I didn't want to go."

"I . . . I still want to go home," whispered Yoko. As she did, a painful loneliness rose in her breast.

"And I wish you best of luck in securing your audience. My prayers go with you."

"Don't you want to hear anything about Japan? I mean, as it is now? At least while we walk to the gates?"

"No need," Wall laughed. "My revolution failed, and I fell into this world, into hiding. I'm content to stay hidden."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Yoko and Rakushun hurried along the highroad, practically jogging all the way to the next town, where they scrambled through the gates just before they closed for the night. The next morning, the duo left as soon as the gates reopened.

Yoko hadn't quite grasped the enormity of what it was they intended to do, but she could guess from the looks she had seen on Wall and Rakushun's faces, and she had let their sense of urgency fill her as well.

"You really think we'll be able to meet the Ever-King?" she asked the beastling as they walked along.

Rakushun stroked his whiskers thoughtfully. "Well now, I can't say. Never asked to see a king before. I doubt we'll be able to just walk up to the palace and knock on the door."

"So what do we do?"

"Well, there'll be regional and provincial officials in Kankyu, for sure, and bureaucratic channels we might have to go through, but I think we might first request a meeting with the *taiho*."

"Taiho?"

Rakushun nodded and drew two characters in the air with the tip of his finger:

台輔

"Taiho. The minister to the king. It's, er, a sort of honorific title. Kankyu's the capital of Sei—that's a province—and the governor there happens to be the taiho."

Yoko had stopped in mid-step, eyes fixed on the patch of empty air where Rakushun had drawn the characters for *taiho.*

"I've . . . heard that word before." *But where?* It sounded so familiar. *Taiho.*

"Well, that's not too surprising."

"No, I mean, I heard it Over There." She was certain she had heard it, though it seemed like it was ages ago . . . "Wait, I know!" All at once, she remembered the voice. "That's what they called Keiki. They called him *taiho.*"

Rakushun's eyes flashed like black opals. "Eh? Keiki? Taiho?"

"Yes," replied Yoko. "Keiki, the one who brought me here. The one who gave me the sword." She laughed. "Apparently, he's my servant. He did call me *master*, after all. Not that he acted very servile."

"N-n-now just wait a minute," stammered Rakushun, waving his hands, his tail sticking straight out. "Someone called this Keiki of yours *taiho*—you're sure of that?"

"Yeah, pretty sure," Yoko said. She noticed the surprise in his eyes. "Wait, you don't know him, do you?"

Rakushun shook his head fiercely. Then his whiskers twitched up and down several times. He seemed deep in thought. "Keiki's a taiho, and you're his master," he muttered to himself.

Yoko fell silent. It all seemed so long ago. The memories came flooding back, as if she were leafing through an old photo

album in her mind. When she came out of her reverie, she noticed Rakushun looking up at her steadily from a few paces away. He seemed at a loss.

"What is it?"

"Erm . . ."

Yoko raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"Okay, if this Keiki really was a taiho, why, then that means he's probably the minister of Kei!"

"Oh?" Yoko looked curiously at Rakushun's dumbfounded expression. "Is there something wrong with Keiki being the taiho?"

Rakushun plopped down by the side of the road and beckoned her over with a small furry paw. Yoko sat down beside him, and he stared up at her a while before she broke the silence.

"What's going on? Who is Keiki, then?"

"This . . . this is big, Yoko."

"I don't understand."

"Look, I'll explain. Just sit right there and listen."

A growing sense of unease filled Yoko. She nodded and listened as Rakushun went on, fidgeting with his whiskers and speaking excitedly in his childlike voice.

"Now, if you'd just told me he was a taiho before now, well that would have explained a lot of strange things that have up and happened. I daresay you wouldn't have had to endure half the troubles you've been through."

"Rakushun, I . . ."

"Look, the only one ever called *taiho* is the minister to a kingdom, right? Now you tell me this taiho's name is Keiki. Well, that has to mean he's the minister of Kei. It just has to."

"Right. So?"

Rakushun stroked his whiskers. He reached out a small paw as though to touch Yoko's hand, but then thought better of it. "So, he's not human. He's not even a demon. He's a *kirin*."

"A kirin?"

"Aye, the biggest and noblest of the spirit-creatures—though normally they walk 'round in human form. Taiho are never humans; they're always kirin. Now, your friend Keiki? That's not really his name; that's a title. I realize that now. He's the *ki*-rin in the kingdom of *Kei*, see?"

"I guess . . ."

"Now, Kei is on the eastern shore of the Blue Sea, right smack between En and Kou. It *used* to be a nice place, good climate, good people."

"And now it's a wreck, right?"

Rakushun nodded deeply. "The old king passed away last year, and a new king has yet to ascend. The king quells the demonkin, vanquishes monstrosities, and protects the land from disasters. That's why when there's no king, the whole place falls apart."

"Right, I see."

"Don't you get it? If Keiki called you master, that means *you're* the next Glory-King!"

Yoko blinked. "Huh?"

"The Glory-King! The King of Kei!"

Yoko sat for a while, unmoving. What Rakushun was saying was so unexpected she didn't quite know how to respond.

"You're the new king of Kei! It's you, Yoko!"

"Wait. I'm not a king . . . I'm a high school student! Sure, I-I might be one of these *taika*, but I'm no royalty!"

"Uh-uh," said Rakushun, waving a finger. "Until he sits on the jeweled throne, the king is a mere mortal. Kings aren't determined by lineage. To be honest, they aren't even selected for their character, or their looks or anything. The only thing that matters is who the kirin chooses."

"But—!"

Rakushun shook his head. "The kirin chooses the king. If Keiki chose you, that makes you the new King of Kei. Kirin follow no one . . . the *only* person they would ever call master is the king."

"That's ridiculous. Besides, even if I were a . . . a ruler . . . wouldn't I be a queen?"

Rakushun rolled his eyes. "Never mind that," he sighed. "What's important is that the taiho chose you.

"The Emperor of Heaven gave each of the original kings a branch, remember? A branch with three fruits: the land, the kingdom, and the throne. The land stands for the people's estates, the kingdom stands for the laws and regulations, and the throne stands for the king's virtue, his advisor . . . in other words, the kirin." Rakushun continued to look bewildered even as he spoke on. "Yoko. You're not a regular person—you're not even a regular taika. You made a pact with Keiki, did you not?"

"A what?"

"A pact, an agreement. I've never done one, now, so I can't say for sure what it'd be like. All I know is that the king is only

human until the moment they make that pact with the kirin. After that . . . they're a god."

Yoko's mind raced, thinking back through her memories of Over There, of the time when she had first met the stranger Keiki. Two words drifted out of the haze. *I accept.*

"I remember . . . Keiki was saying something—I'm not sure what—and I said, 'I accept.' Could that have been it? I remember, he did something very odd then, and I-I felt something . . ."

Yoko remembered the sensation distinctly, now: It had been as if something *moved* through her, rushing, galloping. Moments later, all the window glass in the teachers' room had broken, and while many of her teachers were badly wounded, Yoko was unharmed.

"Something odd?"

"Yes, he got down on one knee before me and lowered his head. Then—that's right, he put my foot on his forehead!"

"That'd be the pact," said Rakushun with some finality. "The kirin is a high, noble beast. It bows to no one . . . except the king."

"But . . ."

"You want to know why? Why you were chosen? Well, don't ask me! How would I know? I'm a wee li'l beastling! I don't hold truck with gods. You know who you *should* ask? The Ever-King!" Rakushun's voice was unexpectedly hard. He stared at Yoko, absentmindedly stroking his whiskers with a single paw. "I shouldn't even be speaking to you."

"Me?"

"If things were as they should be, why, I'd have no business talking with the likes of you, Yoko. I shouldn't even be calling you that! Er, Your Majesty." Rakushun hopped to his feet. "We have to get you to the Ever-King, as soon as possible. We'll stop at the first government office we get to—doesn't have to be in Kankyu—and send word. This is big . . . for this kingdom as well as yours." He spoke with his back turned to Yoko. Then he turned to face her again. "I know your journey has been long, er, Your Mightiness, but I think we'd best ask for help now, rather than delay until we reach Kankyu. We can wait in, er, repose at our lodgings until the Ever-King sends word for Your Loftiness." Rakushun concluded his little speech with a bow so deep his whiskers tickled the ground.

Sadness welled in Yoko. "Wait, Rakushun. You don't have to treat me so different all of a sudden! I'm still me."

"No . . . no, you're not."

"I . . ." Yoko's voice trembled. "I'm only me. I've always just been me. It doesn't matter whether I'm a king or a kaikyaku or a taika; that has nothing to do with it. I'm still the person who's come all this way with you, Rakushun."

Rakushun stood silently, looking at the ground.

"Tell me, what's different? What's changed? I thought I was your friend, Rakushun. If becoming king means I can't have friends, then I don't want to be king."

Still her little friend made no reply.

"Rakushun, that . . . that's discrimination. You wouldn't discriminate against me because I was a kaikyaku, right? So why discriminate against me now?"

"Yoko . . ."

"I haven't changed. I'm not someone far and distant. Even when you try to draw away from me—look! You're only standing two steps away." Yoko pointed at the short stretch of ground between her feet and Rakushun's.

The beastling looked up at Yoko. He fidgeted with his paws, running them through the bristles on his chest and stroking his silken whiskers.

"Am I wrong?"

Rakushun looked down at the ground, then at his short legs. "Yoko . . . that might be two steps for you, but it's at least three steps for me."

Yoko laughed. "My apologies!"

Shuffling nearer, Rakushun reached out a paw and grasped Yoko's hand firmly. "Sorry 'bout that, Yoko."

"Don't be. It's me who should apologize—for getting you involved in this whole affair." Yoko gave an involuntary shudder as she considered what Rakushun had said. She had been chased, hunted implacably; for all she knew, there were pursuers on her trail at this very moment. Maybe her friend was right. Maybe she *was* a king. That might explain the inordinate amount of interest the demons were showing in her.

The rat's jet-black eyes twinkled with laughter. "You know I came to En for myself. Don't you worry 'bout me."

"No, I fear I've been a terrible burden on you."

"Not a burden. If I thought so, I wouldn't have come this far. The moment I decided I'd had enough, I would've turned tail and headed home."

"You were injured on my account."

"Hey, I knew it wouldn't be an easy trip. There are always dangers on the road, maybe not flying horned demons, but still . . . it was worth it to me to make the trip."

"You're a good friend, Rakushun."

"Maybe, maybe. Still, I figured I'd rather be in danger and with you than be safe without you."

"Don't tell me you were expecting it to be this dangerous?"

"Well, maybe I was a bit optimistic. But that's my problem, not yours."

Suddenly at a loss for words, Yoko simply nodded.

The little paw clutched her hand, and she churned inwardly with remorse for endangering her friend. Could he still be punished for harboring a kaikyaku? Might the demons attack his home while he was away? When Rakushun had said that his mother could take care of herself, was he aware of the danger that she might face from the monsters following Yoko?

Impulsively, Yoko stretched out her arms and hugged Rakushun to her, fluffy hair and all. The beastling yelped, burying his face in the gray fur of his chest. His hair was as soft as she had imagined.

"I'm sorry for getting you involved in this. I really am."

"Yoko . . ." His voice sounded like a choke. She let go.

Rakushun was clearly flustered. "Sorry, er . . . got a tad emotional there."

"I don't mind."

The beastling frowned and brushed at his hair with both paws. "You should really learn a little restraint, you know?"

"Hmm?"

Rakushun's whiskers drooped. "You got a lot to learn about this world, lady."

Yoko thought he was probably right.

Rakushun arranged for lodgings at a comfortable inn as soon as they arrived in the next town. There they paused for a few moments while he wrote a short letter to the taiho, then they literally ran to the local government offices, where they handed the letter to a minor official in charge of accepting important correspondence.

As they made their way back out of the office hall, Rakushun explained that once the letter had reached its destination, they would probably receive a reply at their lodgings. Yoko was still bewildered, unable to grasp the whole significance of what was going on. She hadn't accepted the reality that she was a king. She certainly didn't *feel* like a king. Still, she wouldn't hold Rakushun back from writing his letters, and she was willing to wait patiently to see what would happen.

"How long will it take?"

"Well now. I wrote down all I know and asked for an audience with the minister, but who knows how long it'll take the letter to get to him? Not much experience in these matters, I'm afraid."

"Can't you grab an official and have him go ask? Isn't it urgent?" asked Yoko.

Rakushun laughed. "No, I'm afraid they'd just beat me out of the offices and throw me on the street if I did that."

"But what if they ignore our letter?"

"We'll just write more until they come calling for us."

"You think they'll even bother? How will they know we're telling the truth? They don't know who we are."

"Well, I don't see any other way."

"I just don't like waiting around."

"Look, these are big, powerful people we want to visit. We have to play by the rules."

Yoko couldn't believe she was involved in something so grand in scale.

They left the town offices—territorial offices, in this case—and Rakushun pointed her not toward the inn but into the town's central square, which lay nearby.

"What?"

"I want you to see something. Something you've never seen before."

Yoko followed curiously after Rakushun as he cut across the square. Soon they stood before a large white building encircled by a white wall of stone adorned with a relief done in gold and primary colors—Yoko thought the blue glaze on the tiles lining the top of the wall was startlingly beautiful. The name of this town was Yosho, and she saw a sign above the front gate announcing the place to be Yosho Temple. She had seen a similar edifice in every town they had come to, but had never thought to ask what they were for.

"Here?"

"Here."

"The sign says 'temple.' Does that mean a god is worshiped here, like the Emperor of Heaven? Didn't you say most people didn't worship gods?"

"Look and see for yourself."

Rakushun grinned and led the way to the building's entry gate. Two guards stood there; they asked for his identification, then waved the two through.

They passed through the gates and entered a small courtyard with a garden, beyond which was the large building Yoko had seen from the square. After a moment's hesitation she opened the front doors, her hand brushing along the intricately detailed carvings that covered the wood paneling, and entered a large room like a wide corridor that ran deep into the building.

The air inside the structure was still and silent. At the far end of the room was a large square hole in the wall, like a window, through which an inner courtyard was visible.

On all four sides of the window were shelves that appeared to be altars of some sort, covered with flowers, candles, and other offerings. In front of the window, facing it, were four people—two men and two women—praying fervently.

Yoko expected to see something in the space between the altars, but there was nothing but the single glassless window. Maybe they were praying to the scenery? All she could see was the central courtyard and, in the middle of that, a single tree.

Suddenly, Yoko gasped. Rakushun faced the altars, briefly put his paws together, then took Yoko by the hand and led her

again. On either side of the window-wall, two corridors led farther into the building.

Yoko and the beastling walked down one of these, finding that it opened onto the central courtyard, a large open space surfaced with white gravel. There Yoko stopped, looking at what stood in the courtyard's midst.

The white tree.

It was, unmistakably, one of the strange trees under which Yoko had so often found shelter while she was wandering in the mountains. This one was larger than those she had seen in the wild, but its height was no greater. She guessed that its canopy was at least sixty feet across, though it reached only six feet above the ground, and around its edges the branches dipped down so low they touched the gravel. Here and there she saw small ribbonlike decorations that had been attached to the branches, and near many of these a large golden fruit was hanging. The fruit on the trees she had seen in the mountains were small, almost berries, but these were big enough to hold with both hands.

"Rakushun, what is this?"

"This is the village tree."

"The village tree? Where the eggfruit grow?"

"The very same. Inside each one of those golden fruits is a child."

Yoko stared at the tree, stunned. No wonder she hadn't seen these in Japan.

"You were in one of those when a shoku carried you to Wa."

"It's all so hard to believe," she whispered, staring at the tree. The branches and fruit shone with a luster like gold.

"When a couple desires children, they come to the temple. They give offerings and tie ribbons to the tree's branches to ask for a child to be given to them. If the Emperor of Heaven hears their pleas, then the branch with their ribbon will bear fruit. It takes ten moons for the fruit to ripen. When the parents go to pluck it, the fruit falls. Then they leave the fruit for a night, and in the morning it cracks open and the child is born."

"So the tree doesn't just grow fruit by itself. The parents have to come pray for it."

"Very true—though even so there's no certainty. Some parents come to pray and never see a fruit grow, and some see their fruit start overnight. It's Heaven deciding who's fit or unfit to be parents."

"Wait, so was I the same way? Did some parents tie a ribbon around my branch?"

"I would think so. How sad it must've been when their precious eggfruit went missing in the shoku that took you."

"Do you think I could find them?"

"I wonder. You might be able to check the records, with a calendar . . . figure out when you were sent Over There, and find a place where there was a shoku at exactly that time, then figure out how many eggfruit were carried away. Can't say it'd be easy."

"No, it doesn't sound like it would."

Yet if there was a way to find out, Yoko thought she would like to know who these people were. *My true parents.* Somehow,



knowing that there were people here who had prayed for her to be born helped Yoko to finally accept the truth of her origin. She *was* born here, in this world, somewhere encircled by the Void Sea.

"Do children here . . . look like their parents?" she asked him.

"Children look like their parents? Why would they do that?"

Yoko laughed at the confusion evident on Rakushun's face. If a human woman could have a child that looked like a rat, Yoko supposed that was a strong argument against any sort of genetic ties between mother and child.

"Over There, parents and children look alike."

"Huh. Isn't that kind of weird?"

"I don't think so," Yoko said. It occurred to her that she'd never really thought about it before.

"I think it would be awful strange living in a house with people that looked like you."

"You know, maybe you're right."

As Yoko watched, a young couple entered the central courtyard. They seemed to be discussing something. The woman pointed at an empty branch and whispered in the man's ear, and after a moment of indecision, they approached the branch and tied a pretty ribbon around it.

"The parents always design their own ribbons. They think about the child that will be born, and pick an appropriate design. Then they plot out the pattern and sew it on."

Yoko nodded. It sounded like a wonderful custom. "I saw one of these trees in the mountains."

Rakushun turned and looked up at Yoko.

"A wild tree?"

"I suppose that's what it was. It had fruit, too."

"Wild trees bear two kinds of eggfruit. The fruit from which grasses and other trees spring, and the fruit of beasts."

Yoko turned to Rakushun, eyes wide.

"You mean plants and animals also come from these trees?"

Rakushun rolled his eyes. "Where else? They don't just come growing up from the ground, now."

"So animals grow on trees," Yoko said, shaking her head in wonderment. After all, if children came from the trees, why shouldn't everything else?

"Livestock's a little different, though," Rakushun added. "They grow on the village tree here. The farm owner comes here to pray for them. There's a special day and special observances for doing that, of course. But the eggfruit of trees, grasses, and mountain beasts grow on their own. They ripen, and if it's a tree, a seed comes out; if it's a bird, a chick; and if it's a beast, a whelp is born."

"I don't know about seeds, but wouldn't it be dangerous for chicks or small animals to be born all on their own? I'd think something would come along and eat them in a flash."

"Well, for some animals the parents come to pick 'em up. Others stay under the tree until they're strong enough to make it on their own. That's why no beasts will come close to the wild trees. And beasts that would eat each other are never born at the same time. Even the wildest of whelplings never fight under the tree's branches. That's why people who can't get into

a town at night go into the mountains and look for a wild tree. It's safe there, you know."

"That I do know, actually," Yoko said. Another piece of the bizarre puzzle that was this world clicked into place.

"Of course, it works the other way too. Even if you come across the most dangerous sort of animal, if you're near a tree, you mustn't kill it. That's one of the Great Rules."

"I see. So, you can't just go to a tree and grab a chicken egg and eat it."

Rakushun made a distasteful face. "Who would eat an egg with a child inside?"

Yoko laughed. "Who indeed!"

"You know," said Rakushun, "hearing you talk makes me think that a lot of strange things must go on Over There."

"You may be right, Rakushun. What about demons? Is there a tree for them, too?"

"I'd think so—but no one's ever seen a demon tree. I've heard of places where demonkin nest; that's probably where you'd find one, I guess."

Yoko nodded. Suddenly, another question rose in her mind, but it wasn't one that she wanted to ask him, so she kept it to herself. The high walls surrounding the place and the guards at the door were answer enough.

"Something the matter?"

"It's nothing. Thank you for showing me this. It was . . . fun," Yoko said, smiling.

Rakushun grinned, the serious look he'd worn throughout his little lecture finally softening. "Well then I'm glad."

In the central courtyard, the young couple still stood facing the branch, their hands pressed together in prayer.

Back at the inn, Rakushun mumbled that he was "of the opinion that they should procure lodgings of a quality befitting Yoko's new status." Yoko firmly objected, but the beastling said, "I hardly think the Glory-King would stay in a place like this."

"Look, you're the only one who thinks I'm the Glory-King around here. I tend to believe what you say—you're my friend, after all—but we don't know for sure yet."

"But we do know for sure!"

"Even so, I don't see why that should change how we live."

"Yoko . . ."

"Look, this place might not be 'befitting of my status,' but it's certainly befitting of my budget. We don't know how many days it will take before we hear word from the king of En. If we move to some expensive place, and we end up having to stay there a long time, we'll run out of money."

"But you're the Glory-King! You'll be able to pay somehow. Besides, I can't imagine any self-respecting innkeep would take money from a king."

"Then that's even more reason to stay here. I'm not going to live in someone's room and not pay. That's not fair. And I don't like the idea of going someplace with that intention."

After much argument, they finally decided to remain at the inn they'd originally chosen, which was definitely on the

inexpensive side, yet clean and respectable. Their room was small, but it had two beds. There was a window looking over an inner courtyard, and even a small table under the window. Yoko took great satisfaction in the fact that she was able to pay for the place with her own money.

By the time they returned home from the temple it was already evening, so Yoko drew herself a bath, changed clothes, and washed what she had worn during the day. Just to have hot water and be able to put on fresh clothes every day had become a nearly unimaginable luxury.

When she was finished freshening up, Yoko went down to the small dining area where Rakushun awaited her, and they ate. To have a meal while sitting comfortably, not standing at some roadside stall, also seemed a luxury. Yoko sipped her tea slowly, savoring the calm.

She was getting ready to go back to the room when a scream sounded from somewhere behind the inn.

That was no common scream.

As quickly as thinking, Yoko grabbed her sword. No matter how safe she felt, she had never shaken the habit of carrying the weapon by her side, and now she was glad for it. With her hand on the hilt, she dashed outside, where she became immediately aware of a commotion across the road. People were running—swiftly, frantically—fleeing from something unseen.

"Yoko!"

No . . . Not here.

For some reason, she had thought the demons wouldn't come after her here, so far into the peaceful nation of En. Yet now

that she thought about it, she realized she had no good reason to believe a notion like that.

There *were* fewer demons in En, or so she'd been told; and since she and Rakushun had stayed each night in proper lodgings and traveled only during the day, it made sense that they hadn't encountered any demons on the road. But Yoko's enemies surely were not confined to the sort of demons that prowled the mountains at night. In fact, it might have just been blind luck that they had gone so long without being attacked.

"Rakushun, get inside."

"But, Yoko . . ."

Yoko heard something familiar in the screams of the escaping townsfolk—the fear of death. These were the kind of screams people could only make when their lives were truly in danger. *What is coming? Ah—there* . . . Mingled with the screams she heard another voice, like the wailing of an infant.

I hear you.

Yoko drew her blade, handing the scabbard to Rakushun. "Please, Rakushun, inside!"

There was no reply, but she could sense that her friend was no longer standing by her side. A wave of people rushed toward her, and Yoko saw beyond them a black form, like a tiger, but terribly huge, creating the momentary illusion that a small mountain was charging down the street. She heard a familiar scream: "*Bafik!*"

Yoko readied her blade, lowering the point and thrusting it forward as she adopted a mobile defensive stance. The steel shone in the light that spilled from the shops along the street.

The rushing crowd wavered and split cleanly in two to avoid her where she stood.

The giant catlike monster approached at a run, trampling townsfolk beneath its feet, knocking others to the side. Behind it Yoko saw another monstrosity, like a great ox.

Only two . . .

Yoko's body tensed. Though it had been a long time since she had fought, she felt not fear, but a strange elation.

The fleeing crowd dodged to and fro, people diving into the open doors of shops, until no one stood between Yoko and the beasts. She began to run toward them, gaining speed, her sword held at the ready.

She met the tiger-demon first. The thing leapt through the air, slashing with great claws through the empty space where Yoko had been a moment before. As the beast landed, Yoko lunged, driving the point of her blade into the back of its head. A second later, she pulled the weapon free, whirling to meet the onrushing ox; the creature's hide glistened bluish-black in the twilight.

The sheer size of her foes would make dispatching them no easy task, but they were only two, and Yoko was confident she would prevail. Moving smoothly, she ducked around the ox-creature, slashing as she went. Just then she heard Rakushun call to her.

"Yoko! *Kingen!*"

Yoko lifted her eyes to see a flock of chicken-sized birds descending toward her. There might have been a dozen or two; it was hard to tell.

"Watch the tails! They're poisonous!"

Yoko gritted her teeth. These monsters were small, swift, and numerous. This wasn't going to be easy.

The birds' tails were shaped like daggers. She knocked two out of the sky; then, moving with calculated efficiency, she finished off the still-struggling tiger.

She knew instinctively that she had to avoid letting the birds go for her legs—that would open her to attacks from above—so she sprinted past the tiger's corpse and stood with her back to the inn, finding a patch of dry ground where her footing would be good. In the street, the wounded ox bellowed and thrashed wildly on cobblestones slick with demon blood.

The road was narrow and poorly lit, and the flock was coming fast. The only light Yoko had was that from the shops that lined the road, a dim half-light that seemed only to make the shadows deeper. She glanced up. The birds, attacking in close formation, were rapidly nearing; it looked as though they were almost boiling out of the shadows.

Then the ox charged her, head lowered. Yoko leapt to avoid it, simultaneously cutting down another of the birds—and heard yet another demon-sound, voices like rusted metal screaming in an unearthly chorus.

There's more of them?!

Yoko felt the sweat running down her back. The birds had distracted her from finishing off the ox, and it was giving her trouble—and now this . . .

Glancing past the ox-demon, she saw a horde of monkey-like creatures spilling onto the road.

Yoko wrenched her gaze away from the newcomers only to see the sharp tail of one of the birds hovering right before her eyes. It was all she could do to dodge, and now she was off balance—and another bird was descending, its blade-tail pointed straight at her face.

She wouldn't be able to dodge this one.

Poison . . . I wonder how bad a poison? Or will it simply take out my eyes? If I can't see, I can't fight. I could knock it aside with my hand—but there's no time. The thoughts raced through Yoko's head in a blur. She barely had time to blink before the bird was on her.

It has me! No!

She began to close her eyes—and the bird simply vanished. Someone had knocked it down from the side, but she had no time to see who.

She cut down two more birds, then dodged the blue ox once again. A flash caught her eye—the motion of a sword thrust skillfully through the monster's back. Yoko was so distracted she failed to see another bird swooping at her, but this too was cut down by—

A man was beside her in the street. He stood with a warrior's poise, a full head taller than Yoko.

"Focus."

Speaking only that one word, the man turned and slashed down three screeching monkeys with a single swing of his blade.

Then the horde of monkey-demons charged en masse, and the man turned to meet them head-on, Yoko at his side.

He was skilled, more skilled than she was, and many times as strong. The monkeys in the horde seemed too numerous to count, yet it was only a matter of moments before all had fallen and quiet returned to the corpse-ridden street.

"You fight well," the stranger said after he had wiped the grime off his sword and smoothly sheathed it.

Yoko stared at him, mouth agape. He wasn't even breathing heavily. He was a large man, though not so large as to be called massive. He was like what Yoko thought of when she imagined a hero or a king. She caught her breath, looking up at him. He smiled.

"I mean no offense, but are you injured?"

Yoko nodded silently.

The man raised a single eyebrow. "You lack the strength to speak?"

"I . . . no . . . Thank you."

"I've done nothing requiring your thanks, but I accept it nonetheless."

"You saved my life."

"Oh? I merely wished to rid myself of those annoying creatures. Saving you was a side effect."

Yoko stood for a moment, unsure of how to reply. Then she felt a small hand tug at the back of her shirt.

"Yoko, you all right?" It was Rakushun. He was peering uneasily at the corpses on the street.

Yoko retrieved her scabbard from him, then wiped and sheathed her blade. "I'm fine. You were safe, Rakushun?"

"Me? Never been better. Who's he?"

Yoko shrugged. The stranger smiled and turned to look at the building behind Yoko.

"You stay at this inn?"

"Yes."

The man muttered something and gazed around them. "People are gathering. Do you drink?"

"No . . ."

"You?" asked the man, gazing down at Rakushun, who stood looking perplexed and fidgeting with his whiskers. The beastling shrugged noncommittally.

"Then join me. I've no wish to speak with any bothersome officials."

So saying, the stranger turned and began to walk away. Rakushun and Yoko looked at one another, then nodded in unison and followed after him.

The man walked down the road, moving easily through the gathering crowd. After a short distance one of the inns caught his fancy, and he turned abruptly and went up to its door. It was a large inn, brightly adorned. Without so much as a glance at Yoko and Rakushun behind him, he strode through the entrance. Yoko looked over her shoulder at Rakushun. "Well . . . ?"

"What d'you mean? Aren't we going in?"

"Well, I certainly want to talk to this man, I just . . . I mean, I don't want to force you to come in with me. You can go back to the inn. This might not be safe."

"And out here is?" Rakushun demanded, shaking his head. "Let's go, Yoko."

They climbed the low stone steps, Yoko leading as they stepped inside. Once through the door, they found the man standing with an innkeeper at the bottom of a staircase. As soon as he saw Yoko come in, he smiled and headed up the stairs.

Hurrying ahead, the innkeeper led the way to a room on the third floor. It was a large room made of two connected smaller rooms, with a veranda overlooking a central courtyard. All was luxurious and well decorated. Even the furniture seemed expensive, giving Yoko pause. It was certainly a higher class of establishment than any she had set foot in before.

The stranger requested some food and drink from the innkeeper before sitting down on a wide sofa-like chair. It seemed he was used to this sort of place. Perhaps it was an effect of the many candles set about the room, but Yoko suddenly noticed that the man's clothes looked very fine and expensive.

"Um . . ." she began, still standing in the doorway.

The man laughed. "You could try sitting."

"Of course," Yoko mumbled, and then—with a sideways look at Rakushun—went to sit in the nearest chair. She couldn't stop her hands from fidgeting. Seeing this, the man smiled, but he merely sat there watching her and said nothing. Unsure of what to do, Yoko gazed around the room, until the innkeeper arrived bearing a tray with food and some flagons upon it.

"Do you require anything else, master?"

The man shook his head and waved the innkeeper away, telling him to shut the door on his way out.

"Will you drink?"

Yoko shook her head. Beside her, Rakushun also shook his.

"Um . . ." Yoko said, still not sure of what she was going to say, but feeling the need to make some sort of conversation.

The stranger interrupted her. "That's a beautiful sword you have," he said, his eyes going to Yoko's right side. He reached out his arm. Before she could think better of it, Yoko found herself passing the sword to him. The man pulled lightly on the hilt and the blade slid smoothly from its scabbard.

Ignoring Yoko's gasp, he inspected both sword and sheath.

"Your scabbard is dead."

"The scabbard is what?"

"Did you see something? A strange phantasm, perhaps?"

Yoko furrowed her brow. "Excuse me?"

The man smiled at Yoko's look of consternation and replaced the blade in its scabbard. With a graceful motion, he held the sword out to her with both hands.

Yoko took it and grasped the hilt tightly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean what I said. You don't know what it is you have there, do you?"

"What it is? What do you mean?"

The man took a flagon from the tray and filled his cup, seeming completely at ease.

"What you have is the Water Monkey Sword. Its blade is forged of water and its scabbard made of monkey hide, thus it is so named. As a weapon it is a thing of elegance, yet it has other powers as well. At times the blade becomes

luminescent, showing the wielder visions as though through a scrying pool. If one learns how to wield it, one may look into the past and the future, and across distances as great as a thousand li. But if you don't watch it closely, it will show you phantasms of the most irksome sort. Only the scabbard can stop it then."

The man tilted his cup and drank deeply, then looked at Yoko again. "The scabbard itself can change, too, assuming the form of the monkey. The monkey has the power to read men's hearts; yet if you fail to keep watch on it, it will read the darkest parts of your heart and trouble your mind. When this happens, only the sword can be used to stop it. This weapon is one of the secret, sacred treasures of the kingdom of Kei."

Yoko shot to her feet.

"But it's plain to see," the man continued, "this scabbard has died. Without the scabbard to hold them in check, the phantasms must have run wild."

"Who are—" stammered Yoko.

"A letter. You sent it from the territorial offices in this town, no? What is it you had to say?"

But we only sent it today, thought Yoko bewilderedly. *No one could have answered so soon . . .*

"You . . ." She faltered. "You're not the minister of En, are you?"

The man smiled unkindly. "The minister is out. If you've business here, I'll hear it now."

Yoko's heart dropped. So this wasn't the minister.

"I wrote what I had to say in the letter."

"So you did. The Glory-King, was it?"

He read the letter!

"I'm a kaikyaku. I don't know much about this world . . ."

"That would seem to be the case."

"You believe me? You think I'm the Glory-King of Kei?"

"My opinion has naught to do with it. The Water Monkey Sword is a sacred treasure of Kei, made by quelling the greatest of demons without killing it, then trapping its very essence and bending its will until it formed sword and scabbard. The mere act of wielding it is a feat few might aspire to and fewer attain. In other words, you must be the Glory-King. It was, after all, the Glory-King in ages past who trapped the demon that made that blade in the first place."

"—But . . ."

"The demon is trapped and the master is trapped in turn . . . this means that normally, only the sword's true master might draw it. Of course, your scabbard is dead, which is why I was able to draw it myself. Still, even were I to wield the bared blade, in my hands it would not cut the thinnest stalk of straw—let alone call forth the phantasms."

Yoko stared at the man. "Who are you? Tell me."

"Will you not introduce yourself first?"

"My name's Yoko. Yoko Nakajima."

The man turned to Rakushun. "And you are Chosei? The one who penned the letter?"

Rakushun nodded, looking flustered.

"Your common name?" the man asked.

"Rakushun."

"So, we've told you who we are," Yoko said. Her gaze had become almost a glare, but the man seemed unconcerned.

"My name is Naotaka Komatsu," he said simply.

He's Japanese?!

Now Yoko wore a look of surprise. "You're a *kaikyaku?*"

"A taika, actually. Most here call me Shoryu . . . that's the Chinese pronunciation of the characters in my first name, you see."

"And . . . ?" Yoko prompted.

"Yes?"

"Who are you? The minister of Tai's messenger?"

The man laughed out loud. "Why, I'm the king of En. The Ever-King, at your service."



Yoko froze where she sat. Beside her, Rakushun's whiskers went rigid, their tips pointing straight up.

The man who called himself the Ever-King laughed deeply. It was apparent that he was enjoying the moment immensely.

"*The* Ever-King?"

"Indeed. I apologize that my minister could not come, but I thought I might be of some service. Or was your business strictly with him?"

Yoko shook her head *no*, and swallowed noisily.

How did he get here so fast?

The man smiled and dipped his finger in his cup.

"Perhaps a little history would be useful. Let's start at the beginning, shall we? A full year ago, the Glory-King of Kei—a woman like yourself—passed away. She was also called the Prophet—you know this?"

"No," replied Yoko.

The man nodded. "Her true name was Jokak', and she had a sister, Joyei. This sister—why, I do not know—claimed she was the new Glory-King."

"Claimed?"

"For every king, there is a kirin. It is the kirin who chooses the king. This you've heard?"

"Yes."

"Now the Prophet died, leaving her kirin behind—Keiki. You know him?"

"I met him, once. He was the one who brought me Over Here."

The Ever-King nodded once again. "When the Prophet passed, the jeweled throne was left empty. Keiki immediately set out to find a new king and vanished from the royal court. Two months later, word came that a new Glory-King had ascended. However, I'm forced to conclude that this new ruler is a false king."

"False?"

The Ever-King sighed. "Only the kirin can choose the new king. If a king should ascend without the kirin's blessing, that king is false. Now, there are many signs and portents that mark the ascension of a true king, yet the impostor Joyei lacks all of these. On the contrary, her kingdom has become a den of

demonkin, forsaken and wracked with calamity. No; she cannot be the true king of Kei."

"I don't—" Yoko wanted to say that she wasn't sure she understood what he was telling her, but the Ever-King waved his hand for silence.

"I now know for certain that her claim is false. She may be the Prophet's sister, but she is nothing more. She cannot enter the palace, nor can she perform the royal spirit rituals. Because of this, I had thought little would come of her. However . . ." The Ever-King's gaze turned inward as if he were regarding a series of scenes played in his mind.

Yoko sat motionless, waiting attentively. It didn't matter that she wasn't following everything he said; she knew it was important.

After a moment the king went on. "So, imagine my surprise when Joyei set up camp in a governor's castle and from there announced her own ascendance as the new Glory-King. Of course, her people had no way of knowing the truth—that is, they had no reason to doubt her, and so they believed. Thereupon she claimed that the various governors of the land had collaborated in treason, preventing her from entering the palace. This, too, the people believed, and so they censured the governors, who were in truth blameless. Joyei next declared war on the so-called 'corrupt officials' of her land and sent out a call for new administrators, new bureaucrats, and soldiers to form a new army. The willing rose in great numbers."

As he spoke, the Ever-King's expression grew bitter. "There was a long period of turmoil before the Prophet took the

throne, and her reign was short. The kingdom remained in chaos for years, and the ill will of the peasants toward their lords ran deep. Because of these misfortunes, when the false king declared ascendancy, there was little will to stop her. Of nine provinces, three fell immediately to the false king's army."

"Did no one argue against her?"

"Some. Yet with the kirin missing, there was no way to say for sure. It could be as the false king claimed, that the governors had hidden the kirin, fearing it would tell the truth of their treachery. Then, when the false king actually produced a kirin, there was little room left to doubt her.

"—Yes," he continued, answering Yoko's surprised look, "Joyei revealed a kirin—in beast form—saying it had been recaptured from her enemies in the kingdom. Half of the remaining six provinces threw their lot in with the false king then."

"Produced the kirin? How? It wasn't Keiki, was it?"

"No . . . though I fear that he *was* captured and is held against his will."

That's why he couldn't come find me.

Her worst fear hadn't come true, but this was certainly bad enough.

"So, is it this Joyei who is sending the assassins—the demons?" asked Rakushun.

"That need not be the case. Demons attack humans; that is nothing unusual. But for demons to hunt a particular person, *that* is unheard of—unless, of course, they were *sirei*.

"*Sirei?*"

"Messengers, servants. The kirin may call upon the power vested in the sacred treasures of the kingdom to control the sirei. If it is true that someone is controlling demons, sending them to attack you, then this person must not be a person at all, but a kirin."

So the demons that followed Keiki were these sirei, thought Yoko. Beside her, Rakushun leapt up from his chair. "Impossible!"

The Ever-King nodded gravely. "Impossible indeed. But it can be nothing else. The demons that attacked the true Glory-King were the sirei of a kirin, and the wild demons they had gathered to their aid."

"Wait . . . So that means . . ."

"When you consider the facts, the impostor Joyei has neither the connections nor the gold to support an entire army. There must be someone behind her, in the shadows, backing her claim. Someone very rich. If she commands sirei as well, then this means that someone is a king."

Yoko glanced back and forth between the Ever-King and Rakushun. "What does that mean?"

"Do you know what manner of beast the kirin is?"

"Yes, a spirit-beast—the one who chooses the king."

"Precisely. The kirin are fey, but not demonkin. Rather they are close to being gods themselves. In their natural form, they are beasts, yet they usually assume the guise of a human. By nature, they are benevolent and merciful creatures. They may be proud and fiercely independent, yet they dislike war and conflict of all sorts. In particular, they fear blood; merely touching it can cause them grave illness. Never will they wield

a sword to do battle. Their only protection is their sirei. The sirei are demons who have entered into a pact with the kirin. No matter how far they may fall from the kirin's favor, they would never willfully attack a human being. They are bound to the nature of the kirin."

"But they attacked me?"

"That they did. There can be only one explanation: the king is the kirin's master. The kirin must obey the king in all things. While it is not in the kirin's nature to harbor ill will against another, if the king should command otherwise, the kirin would have little choice. That the sirei attacked you must mean a king ordered a kirin to make them do so."

"But . . . what if this Joyei person has a kirin of her own?"

"No. There can be only one kirin for one kingdom. Either it serves its master the king, or it is searching for the new king. Nothing else."

So, some other king was making these attacks on Yoko's life. Suddenly, Yoko remembered.

That woman on the mountain path—she mourned the fallen demon. That must've been a kirin, mourning her sirei! And when that parrot—whatever it *was—ordered her to strike me, she did so unwillingly, with tears in her eyes. Could it be that the parrot was somehow a king, and the woman his kirin?*

It was all starting to make sense.

"But who?" she asked, and added silently, *Which king wants me dead?*

Again the Ever-King's gaze turned inward. "All will be discovered soon enough."

"But . . ."

"As long as we have you under our protection here in En, you cannot be harmed. And I believe it will soon be apparent who has plotted the death of Kei's true Glory-King. Heaven will not turn a blind eye on this for long."

"I'm not sure I fully understand," Yoko said.

"We need only wait. We shall soon see which way the kingdom of Kei leans, and then we will know who has ordered these attacks on your life. However," he added, "the matter of your kirin is more urgent. He is being held in Kei, and we must find a way to rescue him. For this, and for your protection, I will require you to come with me to a safer place. Can you depart from here?"

"You mean right now?"

"If possible, yes. Of course, you have time to gather your belongings if you've left any at your lodgings. I want you to join me at my domicile."

Yoko looked at Rakushun. Rakushun nodded. "You should go, Yoko. You'll be safe there."

"But . . ."

"Don't worry 'bout me. Go."

The Ever-King laughed at Rakushun. "One more guest would not be a burden. My residence may be a bit rundown, but there's plenty of room."

"I-I couldn't . . ."

"My people are an unmannered lot, but you are welcome to come if you wish. I believe the Glory-King would prefer that herself," he added with a look at Yoko.

By "residence" the Ever-King was evidently referring to Shadowlore Palace in Kankyu—yet he spoke of it as though it were some hinterland shack. Yoko shook her head and looked at Rakushun. "Come with me, please! I wouldn't feel right leaving you behind."

Rakushun nodded awkwardly.

Yoko had been worried about how the Ever-King would bring her and Rakushun to Kankyu. Perhaps he had some magical means of transport that had whisked him here on the very day they had sent that letter, yet there was no guarantee they would be able to partake of it. She knew the city was at least a month away by foot, and guessed that sometimes they might be forced to stay outside of the towns at night; it was beginning to seem that it might be even less safe inside the towns than out.

When the two friends followed the king to the edge of town, however, a single sharp whistle on his fingers solved the mystery: In answer to his summons, giant shadows loomed above the low wall that ran along the roadside. Out of the shadows stepped two tigers, their pelts shining with a faint luminescence. Stripes ran down their sides, black but shimmering like oil slicks, bordering stripes of translucent white that changed hue with the cast of the light like pearls. The creatures' eyes like black opals snagged Yoko's heart, and their tails seemed impossibly long.

Just as she had on that first night when she crossed the Void Sea, Yoko soon found herself astride a fantastical beast; the

three travelers rode by the light of the half moon, galloping through the sky toward Kankyu.

Yoko's crossing from Over There seemed so long ago, now. She had understood so little then, about Keiki, about herself. Thinking back, she was amazed at how much time had passed since she had come to this world. It had still been the cold of the year when she rode the sirei named Hyoki toward the sea, and now it was summer. The day's warmth lingered in the night air, and she wished she could feel the breeze, though something in the aura of the creature that carried her sheltered her from all wind.

The beast galloped higher and higher, and Yoko stared down at the darkened world spread out below. Here and there the night of En was brightened where villages and towns formed little clusters of light, reminding her of the glitterings she had seen in the depths of the Void Sea.

"Yoko, look—Kankyu!" Rakushun exclaimed from where he clung behind her, pointing with a tiny paw over her shoulder. It had been all of two hours since their journey began.

Yoko looked in the direction Rakushun pointed, but she could see nothing. No town lights, nothing but inky darkness. She was about to ask what he saw, when she realized she was looking at the wrong thing. Rakushun wasn't pointing at something in the darkness; he was pointing at the darkness itself.

"No way . . ."

Under the light of the half moon, the world below them was the color of the deep sea, its dark expanse broken here and there by the pale outlines of forest trees, their silhouettes rising like waves. In their midst, she saw innumerable pinpoints of light, and ahead, a deep chasm that cut a swath of blackness out of the forest.

No, thought Yoko, *it's not a chasm*. It was a dark shadow, a moon shadow, cast by something that looked like a hole in the night. But it was not a hole; it was the opposite.

"A mountain . . ."

And what a mountain! It was so tall that although the towns at its base looked like mere dots from the height of the flying beasts, its peak soared high, high above them still. *A mountain that reaches to the heavens, just like Rakushun said.*

She hadn't thought such a thing could actually exist. For a moment she had the terrifying feeling that she was tiny, a meaningless creature in the face of something so vast she could only begin to comprehend it.

The mountain stood like a pillar driven through heaven and earth. Thrusting up from the hilly land below, it looked like an immense, closely bound bundle of brushes, all of different heights. The steep, sharp summit was hidden in a wreath of clouds.

The rock face before them was like a gigantic wall.

"That's Kankyu? That whole mountain?" Yoko looked down to the forest rushing by below them, then back up at the mountain. It was still quite distant. *But it looks so huge.*

"Aye. That is Mount Kankyu," muttered Rakushun behind her. "The palace-mountains of every kingdom are like this. Shadowlore Palace rests atop its highest peak."

The lines of the cliff edges on the towering spire were limned by faint silver moonlight. The rock walls were steep, nearly perfectly vertical. Yoko searched the peak for the palace, but she could see nothing through the clouds. At the mountain's base, her eyes picked out a tiny cluster of lights.

"Those lights are the town of Kankyu."

If that was the capital of the kingdom, then it was surely larger than Ugou, yet its glow was so far away still that the whole town seemed little larger than a speck.

Yoko sat in a daze for a while, clinging more tightly to the back of the great tiger.

Though the peak did not seem far distant, now, even rushing toward it on the speeding legs of the flying beasts for a long time they seemed to draw no closer. It was almost as if they were moving backward. Then at last the thin spire of the mountain came perceptibly nearer, growing in Yoko's vision until she could no longer see its entirety without tilting her head. After a time, they drew so close she could not see the top even if she looked straight up. Below them the outline of the town of Kankyu became more clearly visible.

Kankyu spread in a semicircle through the rolling hills around the base of the impossibly high mountain. *In the shadow of such a giant mountain,* Yoko thought, *the night must be very long indeed.*

"I went to Gosou Where-the-Frost-Is-Proud in Kou, once, and it was the same," said Rakushun. "Gosou lies on its mountain's east side, as I recall, and the twilight would stretch on forever."

Seen from above at this lesser distance, Kankyu was clearly enormous, a sea of lights. Ahead of the travelers, the mountain's sheer face filled their sight. The layered stones of the vertical spire rose up, treeless and bare, above great, pale cliffs.

Ahead of them, the Ever-King guided his mount to a place high on the mountainside, alighting on a crag that thrust from a stark cliff face.

Yoko saw that the crag was flat on top, like a shelf jutting out from the side of the mountain, with enough space to build a small gymnasium atop it. It looked as though a large boulder had been joined onto the mountainside and then cut in half, the top hewn away and discarded.

Following the Ever-King, the tiger carrying Yoko and Rakushun alighted on the stony shelf. The Ever-King had already dismounted. He turned to them and smiled. "Congratulations, you made it without falling."

Yoko wondered how one could fall from the back of a beast that moved through the air so smoothly, without even the feel of the wind. As though he could read her mind, the king laughed and said, "The heights make some dizzy, and others feel so safe in the beast's umbra that they drift off to sleep and tumble down."

The white rock of the great ledge was cut perfectly flat, and an intricate pattern had been carved deeply into its surface—*perhaps to stop skidding*, thought Yoko. There was no wall or balustrade along the edge of the shelf, and Yoko had no intention of going to look over the side. She couldn't imagine how high above the ground they must be.

Set in the cliff wall atop the ledge was a large, two-paneled door toward which the Ever-King now strode with long purposeful strides. Before he reached them, the doors swung silently inward.

Opening the doors were two soldiers—or so Yoko assumed they were, due to the leather breastplates they wore. They performed their task with seeming ease, though the doors were at least twice as tall as they and looked to be made out of single slabs of solid, white rock.

The king nodded to the guards, then turned back to Yoko and Rakushun standing there next to the beasts. He motioned for them with his head and entered through the doors. Yoko and Rakushun hastened to follow him, and the two soldiers bowed slightly, then stepped outside and ran to the two beasts resting atop the ledge. Yoko peered back at them curiously. She imagined that the guards would give the creatures water and feed, maybe brush them down—just as one would care for a horse.

"It's this way," said the Ever-King, glancing at Yoko. "Something wrong?"

Hurriedly, she went to catch up, finding herself in a wide corridor brightly lit by a chandelier-like ring of sconces that hung from the ceiling. Yoko guessed this must be an unusual sight in this world, based on the furious speed with which Rakushun stroked his whiskers.

At the end of the short corridor, they came to a small chamber, then passed through a tunnel-like arch to find themselves at the bottom of a stair made of the same white stone as

the ledge. Rakushun looked up the staircase and smoothed his whiskers. One foot on the bottom step, the Ever-King turned to look at them.

"Are you in need of something?"

"No," said Rakushun, his face taut. Yoko could see the tension in his eyes. "Um, Yoko?" he whispered. "Do we . . . have to climb this?"

"I think so," answered Yoko, swallowing. The ledge they had landed on was very high up the mountain, yet there was still at least a skyscraper's height between them and the summit. If they were to climb all that way, this would be no easy task.

Still, she couldn't bring herself to complain, and so she stepped up onto the first step, tugging on Rakushun's hand. Each step was low enough, but the staircase itself seemed to stretch on forever. On and on they climbed, following after the Ever-King, and when at last they reached the top they found themselves in a large hall. Here, they turned ninety degrees and climbed up another staircase, until they reached a smaller chamber. In the back of this chamber was an ornately carved wooden door.

As they passed through the doorway, a gentle wind smelling strongly of the sea brushed against their faces.

Yoko gasped. Before the door was a large terrace, and beyond that stretched a sea of . . . *Clouds. We're above the clouds!*

—*But that's impossible. We didn't climb* that *far.*

The terrace floor was of white rock, and this one did have a balustrade, also fashioned of white stone, below which the clouds surged against the mountain.

Wait, those really are waves!

Yoko's eyes opened wide. "Rakushun, it's the sea!" she cried aloud, running up to grasp the stone railing. Below her feet, the waves crashed against the side of the cliff. They were standing at the seashore; she could smell the brine in her nostrils.

"Of course it is. We're above the sky," Rakushun said simply.

Yoko turned to look at him. "There's a sea on top of the sky?"

"Why yes, a sea of clouds. Don't you call it that where you're from?"

The wind blowing in across the waves made the smell of sea salt that much more potent. It was night, and the sea was dark, but the crests of the waves shone in the moonlight. Yoko leaned over the railing and looked down into the depths, and there, at the bottom of the sea, she saw lights. It was just like looking into the Void Sea, except that she knew these lights were the lights of Kankyu far below them.

"Amazing! Why doesn't the water fall?"

"What do you think rain is?" said the Ever-King, smiling. "But seriously, if all the Cloud Sea's water fell at once, pity the poor souls beneath it. If it pleases you, I shall prepare a room for the Glory-King with a terrace of its own."

"Um . . ." said Yoko, not sure how to address their host. "Could you not call me the Glory-King?"

The Ever-King raised an eyebrow curiously. "Why not?"

"It's just . . . it sounds like you're talking about someone else."

The Ever-King smiled at that. He looked as though he was about to say something, when suddenly he looked skyward.

Yoko followed his eyes to see a thin white light flowing through the sky above them.

"My taiho has returned. I beg your leave, *Yoko*." So saying, the Ever-King turned away. A short stair went up from the left rear wall of the cloud terrace. Yoko followed him up it. Rounding a corner at the top, she stopped, dumfounded by what lay before her.

From her new vantage point she could see the steep mountain wall rising like an island out of the Cloud Sea, and there, on the alabaster mountainside, bathed in the unfiltered moonlight, stood innumerable buildings. Strange outcroppings of mountain stone rose around them, like the oddly shaped hills she had seen in Chinese ink paintings. Even at this height, trees grew from the rock, and thin waterfalls ran everywhere.

Some of the buildings on the cliff were towers, others spires; all were interconnected, forming one giant building.

It was like an enormous castle wrapped around the mountain peak. This was the heart of En, the home of the Ever-King: Shadowlore Palace.

Yoko and Rakushun followed the Ever-King into one of the palace buildings, where they immediately found themselves surrounded by servants—men and women—who crowded them away from their host and into what Yoko assumed were to be their guest chambers. The two friends' hesitant protests were met with looks of absolute disinterest.

"Change here. Hot water shall be brought."

It seemed that although guests might be welcome in the palace, their grimy traveling clothes were not. Confused, Yoko merely nodded and washed herself with steaming water from the basin that a serving woman carried in for her. She and Rakushun took turns bathing behind the single screen in the room; when Yoko was finished, she went into the next room to find that new clothes had been placed upon a large table for her there.

"You're supposed to wear that?" Rakushun asked, making a distasteful face as he picked up the brilliantly colored kimono and began to inspect it. "This is men's garb. Either they think you're a man, or the Ever-King is having a little fun."

"There's some here for you, too, Rakushun."

Rakushun's shoulders drooped. "Well, it might be a little late for making first impressions, but I guess I wasn't really dressed for the occasion."

Actually, you were naked, thought Yoko as she handed him his clothes. She recalled the beastlings she had seen in the port town when she arrived in En. Not a few had been quite well dressed. She had, however, gotten used to seeing Rakushun clad only in his fur, so the thought of him dressed up was rather comical.

Head hung low, dragging his tail, Rakushun shuffled behind a divider, and they both began to change. Yoko inspected the pants she had been given: wide at the leg, made of a soft, fine-woven cloth. Her blouse and overcoat were also made of the same thin material. The overcoat was long and elegantly embroidered.

From the supple feel of the cloth, Yoko guessed it was silk. She was used to rougher stuff, and the soft fabric tickled her skin. When she had fastened on the embroidered belt, an old man appeared at the door.

"You are dressed?"

"Yes," replied Yoko, "but my friend . . ."

Just then, the dividing screen moved.

"I'm fine. I'm done," said a low voice from behind the screen. A figure emerged, and Yoko stood in shock, speechless.

"What?"

"You're . . . I don't . . . Rakushun, is that you?"

"Of course." The figure who had stepped forth, wearing Rakushun's new silk outfit, spoke seriously, then flashed a sudden grin. "Oh, right. First time seeing me like this, eh? No, don't worry; I'm the same old Rakushun, I promise."

Yoko felt dizzy. She held her head in her hands. "I forgot how crazy this world . . . I mean, I think I have a lot more to learn."

"Seems that way." The young man who stood smiling before her, calling himself Rakushun, was perhaps just over twenty years of age, and very, very human. He seemed perfectly healthy, if a little on the thin side.

"What, you didn't think I was some kind of talking rat, did you? I told you I was a half-beast. Well, you saw the beast. This is me other half."

"You don't say," said Yoko, her face burning. *Back then, when I hugged him . . . No wonder he told me I should learn a little restraint.* And they hadn't just hugged; they had shared the same room on

their travels. She even vaguely remembered him changing her clothes for her, when he found her that day long ago.

"I thought you had your head firmly on your shoulders, but now I'm starting to wonder, Yoko."

"You're not the only one. Why . . . why don't you always look human?" she demanded, not intending it to sound half as exasperated as it did.

Rakushun sighed out loud. "I like being that way more than this. It's easier." His shoulders slumped under the red cloth of his kimono. "When I'm like this it feels like I'm all dressed up or something—I get all tense. And, of course, now I really *am* dressed up . . ." he mumbled, sounding honestly distraught, and Yoko couldn't help but laugh.

The old servant led them down a long corridor and into a large chamber where tall open windows along one wall let in the smell of the sea. Their host was standing on the terrace looking out across the waves. He turned as they entered. He, too, was wearing new clothes not much different from the hoh that Yoko and Rakushun wore. It occurred to Yoko that for royalty, these clothes were quite plain; evidently the Ever-King was dressing down. *He's awfully easygoing for a king.*

He strode toward them. "You're finished changing? I'm afraid my servants are rather keen on ceremony and procedure. You are our honored guests, but it's simpler if you do as they say. I hope you were not inconvenienced," he said with a laugh, his eyes filled with mirth. Yoko smiled.

"Feel free to take that off if you wish, Rakushun," the king added.

The young man—Yoko had to remind herself that this really was Rakushun—smiled nervously, and said, "It's fine, m'lord. And the taiho?"

"He should be here any moment."

Just then, the room's large entry door opened again, and a briny wind blew in. "Ah," said the king, looking up. "We were just talking about you."

As in most of the formal rooms Yoko had seen in this world, this room had a screen standing in front of the door, so the newcomer was invisible until he stepped farther into the chamber. Then they saw that it was a young boy, perhaps twelve or thirteen years of age, with hair of brilliant gold.

"Well? What news have you?" asked the Ever-King when the boy had drawn near.

"She hasn't got up to the palace, of course." The boy's eyes shot over toward Yoko and Rakushun. "What? You have guests?"

"Not my guests. Yours."

"Mine? Never seen 'em before." The boy squinted his eyes, looking at Yoko's face. "So? Who are you?"

"You could choose your words more carefully," said the Ever-King with a sigh.

"Hey, they're my guests, so butt out. How d'you like *them* words?" the boy said, scowling.

The Ever-King clicked his tongue. "You'll regret it . . ."

"What? This your future wife or something?"

"Enough."

"No? She your mother?"

"Would she have to be my bride or my mother for you to be polite?" asked the Ever-King, sighing again. He turned to Yoko. "I apologize for the lack of respect. This is Enki." He turned back to the boy. "Rokuta, this woman to whom you are speaking is the king of Kei. The new Glory-King."

The boy made a sound somewhere between a cough and a gasp and leapt back. He looked up at Yoko. Unable to restrain herself, Yoko burst out laughing. It was the first time since she had crossed the Void Sea that her laughter was loud and lacking any bitter edge.

"Why didn't you say so sooner? Man, ain't you got any manners?" the boy said vindictively.

"You're hardly one to talk. Accompanying the Glory-King is Master Rakushun," the king went on, smiling; then his face grew more serious. "What of Kei?"

The answering smile faded from the young boy's face. "The province of Ki has fallen."

Stepping closer to Yoko, Rakushun drew the character *ki* with his finger on her palm:

紀

With her automatic translator working, Yoko didn't need to rely on writing to understand or be understood, yet she was grateful for Rakushun's instruction. If she never learned how to write the names of places in this world, she would be illiterate forever.

"Baku Province is the last remaining holdout," Enki continued. "Joyei remains in Sei Province, as we expected. Her army has swollen to the point where the kingsmen would have

little chance in open conflict." At the word *kingsmen*, Rakushun wrote two more characters:

王師

This must be the term for the true king's army, Yoko realized. Her army.

"Already the false king prepares to move on Baku. The governor of Baku commands an army of three thousand. They will be lucky if they even succeed in slowing her advance. Her victory is only a matter of time." So saying, the boy hopped up to sit on a nearby tabletop, where he began munching on a fruit that had been lying there. "So where'd you find the Glory-King?"

The Ever-King proceeded to explain everything the two friends had told him of Yoko's arrival in this world, and all that had transpired since they met. Enki sat quietly, listening to every detail, his stern and thoughtful expression making him look much older than a boy of thirteen. "So who's the fool who set a kirin to attack a human?"

"Let us leave that matter for later," said the king. "His or her identity will be revealed in due time. There's a more pressing problem: Keiki must be freed."

Enki nodded gravely. "Then we'd better hurry. Once they find out the Glory-King's shown up, they're sure to kill her."

"Um . . ." said Yoko suddenly. "I'm sorry, but I'm not sure I understand what any of this has to do with me."

The Ever-King raised an eyebrow.

"I was brought to this world knowing nothing about it. I was brought to this *palace* knowing practically nothing. You say I am

the Glory-King, so perhaps that is so; you say some other king wants me dead, and that's probably true too. But I never wanted to be the Glory-King, nor did I contact you because I wanted some sort of—of recognition, or *glory*. I was just sick of being chased by demons and the guardsmen in Kou. I came to you to find a way to go home, to Wa. That's all."

Enki and his master exchanged glances. For a long while the room was filled with a weighty silence. It was the Ever-King who spoke first.

"Yoko, be seated."

"No, look—" she began.

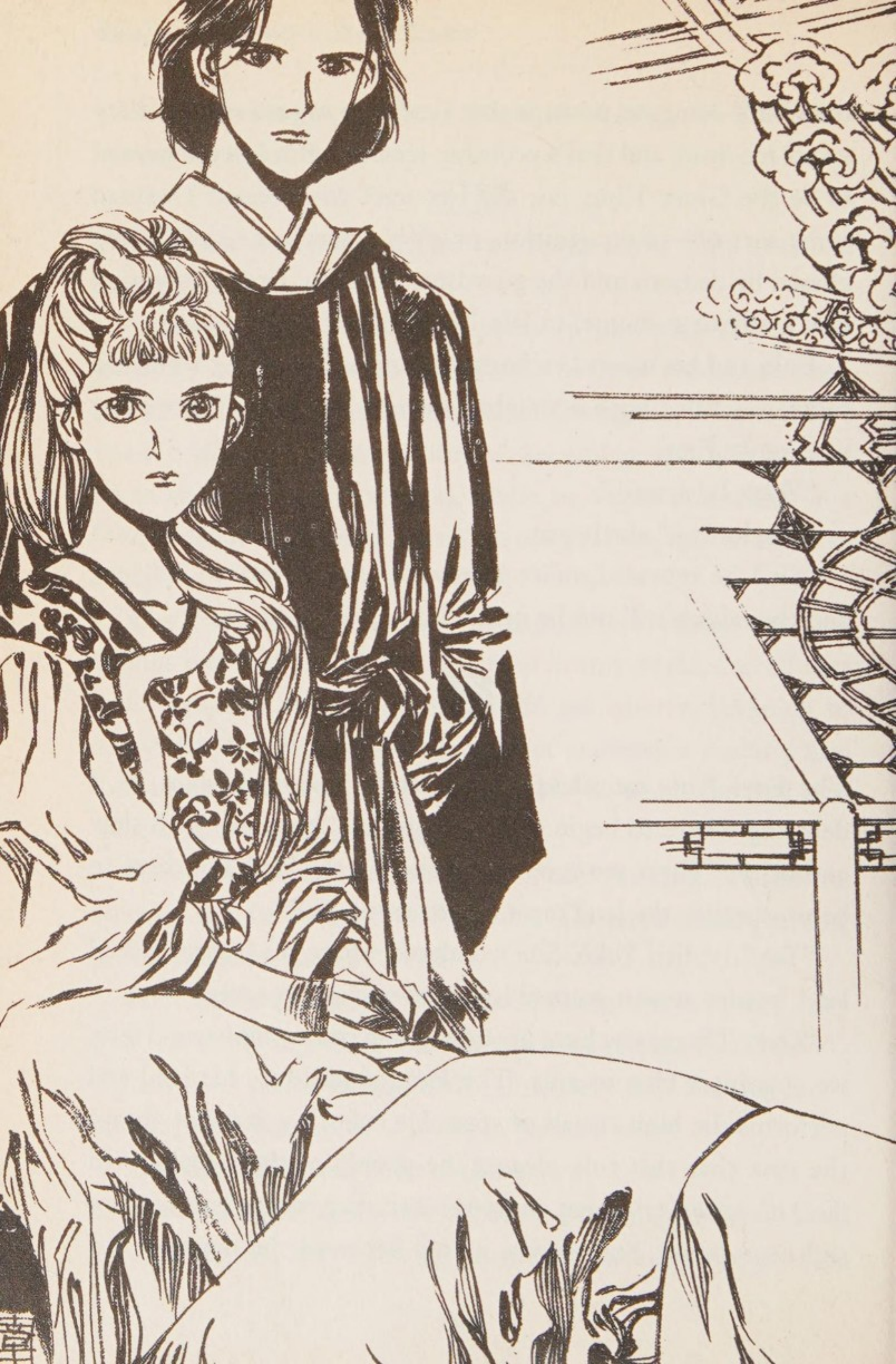
"Sit," he repeated, more firmly. "I have a story to tell you, and the telling will not be quick."

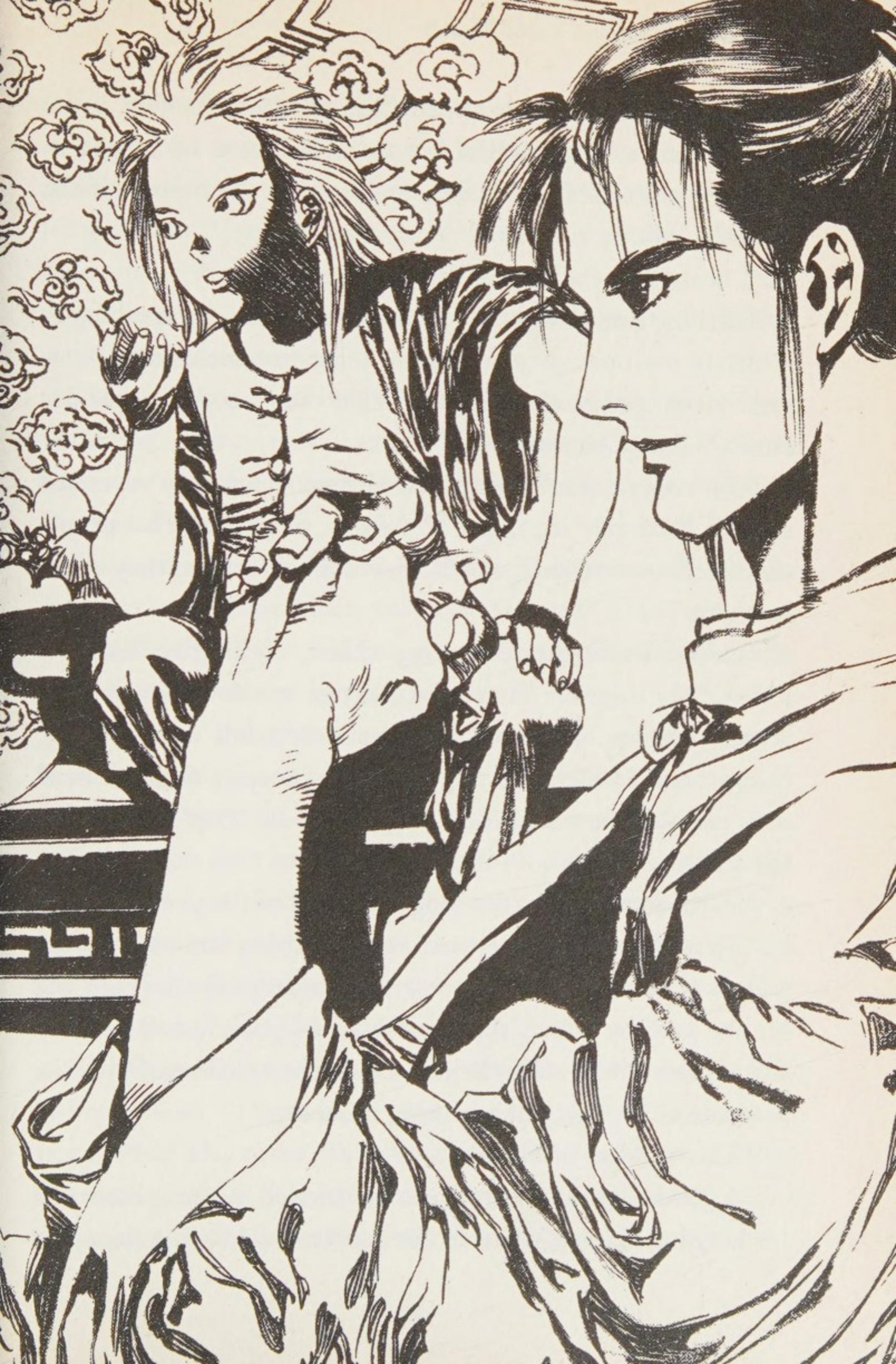


The Ever-King sat silently for a while, lost in thought, as if debating where to begin. After some time, he spoke with slow authority. "There are people, and there is the land. For there to be prosperity, the land must be governed, yes?"

"Yes," replied Yoko. She wondered where his lecture would lead, but for now it seemed harmless enough to agree.

"Over There, you have presidents and prime ministers. Here, we appoint a king to rule. The king administers his land and performs the high rituals of state. He rules; but it is not always the case that this rule pleases the people of the kingdom. In fact, it's often true that supreme authority makes one corrupt and over-proud. Sometimes, a king becomes the oppressor of





his own people. This is not entirely the fault of the king. From the moment a king is given his authority, he is no longer an ordinary mortal. He no longer understands the desires of the common folk."

"I heard that the Ever-King was a great ruler."

The king smiled with wry amusement. "I am not speaking to illustrate my own virtues—do not jump to conclusions. Now, some kings oppress their people. What then can the people do? How shall they be saved?"

"One way might be this 'social democracy' you've talked about," Enki put in, much to Yoko's surprise. "The people choose their own king, and if they don't like him, they make him quit."

"Indeed," said the Ever-King. Then, turning to Yoko he added, "My minister has a great interest in the affairs of Over There, you see. However, we have a different way of doing things here. If a king is oppressing his people, then we need only choose a new king who will not do so. This task falls to the kirin."

"So the kirin selects the king on behalf of the people?"

"That is correct. Here, we have something known as divine will. It is said that the Emperor of Heaven made the land and set the laws by which that land is to be governed. The kirin follows this divine will when choosing the new king. With the mandate of Heaven, the new king is chosen."

"The mandate of Heaven?"

"A good king sits wisely upon the jeweled throne, protecting his kingdom, giving solace to the people, and keeping the peace

when turmoil threatens. The kirin must choose a king who is capable of doing this, yet the kirin is merely enacting the mandate of Heaven. Some may call me a great ruler and say a king such as myself is a rare thing, but this is untrue. All kings have the potential to become great rulers."

Yoko sat silently, not sure how to respond, or even whether a response was required.

"Indeed, there have been many great rulers, both Over Here and Over There—in Wa and in Kan," he continued. "Still, in both our worlds, all lands have known strife at one time or another. Why?"

Yoko furrowed her brow, thinking. "I suppose it's because even a great ruler can make mistakes. And even if they are great, eventually they'll die. There's no guarantee that the ruler who follows them will also learn to be great."

"Precisely. But there exists a solution: To prevent a great ruler from dying, one need only make him a god. This removes half the problem. Of course, gods too can die, though it is rare; but when this does happen here, the throne does not pass to the dead king's heir. Instead, it is the kirin who chooses the next king and watches to make sure the new king does not step off the true path. Elegant, yes?"

"I suppose," said Yoko, uncertainly.

The Ever-King nodded, seeming unperturbed by Yoko's lack of enthusiasm. "I have been given the kingdom of En to rule. It was Enki who chose me to be king. Others may have desired the throne, others may have shown great diligence in seeking it, but as long as the kirin does not choose them, they will never

become king. And it is in the kirin's nature to choose well. It is like when a man chooses a woman or when a woman chooses a man. Now, I am a taika. I was not born here. Like you, I knew nothing of kingship in my former life; yet when the kirin chose me, from that moment on I was the king of En. The divine will was done, and so my course was set."

"So you're saying that's what's happened to me? I can't just go home and forget this?"

"You may go home, if you wish. Yet you will remain the king of Kei. There is no changing that fact."

Yoko nodded, her mind racing.

"The kirin enters into a pact with the king he has chosen. He will never leave his master's realm of his own free will, never abandon his master to death. Once the king has taken the throne, the kirin stands by his side as his minister and most trusted adviser."

"Wait . . . so Enki advises you?" said Yoko with a doubtful glance at the young boy sitting cross-legged atop the table.

The Ever-King laughed an easy laugh. "Yes. Appearances aside, all kirin are creatures of utmost benevolence. The kirin is made of justice and mercy."

Enki grimaced. His master laughed again. "The taiho's advice is the word of justice and mercy. However, a kingdom cannot be run on justice and mercy alone. On occasion, I must ignore Enki's admonitions and do things that are . . . unmerciful. This I do for the good of the kingdom. If I did all as Enki suggested, the kingdom would surely falter."

"Really?" asked Yoko, frowning.

"Let us say, for instance, there is a criminal. He has killed others for money. He is despicable. But, look closer. At home, he has a starving wife and child. Here, Enki might advise me to save him, and thereby save them. That would be the merciful thing to do. And yet, if we allow criminals like this to go free, the kingdom would fall into ruin. As sad as it might be, the criminal must be tried and punished."

"Yes, I can see that," said Yoko.

"Now let us say that I've ordered Enki to put this criminal to death. It goes against the kirin's very nature to do this. However, in the end, he will kill the criminal, complaining all the while. Why? Because the kirin must obey the king's orders. This is absolute. A kirin can never turn against his master's word. Should I ask him to die, even, he could not resist the order."

"So, once he chooses you, you're free to do as you will—and he is not?"

"That is what you might call a sticky situation. The will of Heaven is for justice and mercy, desiring that all kingdoms be ruled in the name of these two virtues. To this end, it speaks through the kirin. However, as I said, justice and mercy alone do not a ruler make. Some things must be done that are unjust and unmerciful. Should a king do these things in excess, however, or without reason, he will lose the mandate of Heaven."

Yoko sat, staring at the Ever-King.

"The king may do unmerciful deeds for the sake of the kingdom, but when his every action lacks mercy, he is no longer qualified to be king. Should the king err in his path and lose his

mandate, the kirin becomes ill. This illness is called the *sitsudou*. The losing-of-the-way."

As he spoke, the Ever-King drew two characters in the air:

失道

"It is a malady that afflicts the kirin only when his king has strayed from the true path. Should the king mend his ways, all is well. Should he not, the kirin's sickness progresses. And it is no easy thing to regain the path when one has strayed. Very few are the times that a kirin so afflicted has recovered."

"What happens if he doesn't recover?"

"Eventually the *sitsudou* kills him. When a kirin dies, so does the king."

"Dies? Just like that?"

"A man's life is short. The king does not die, nor grow old, because he is counted among the gods, and as such, he is immortal. However, he's only a god because the kirin has made it so. Without the kirin, the king becomes mortal once again."

Yoko nodded.

"There is, however, one other way to save the kirin."

"And that would be?"

"If the kirin is released from his bond with the king, he may survive. The easiest way to release the kirin is for the king to die of his own accord. The death of the king does not mean the death of the kirin, you see."

"And then the kirin is well again?"

"Yes. Of course, I am now speaking of what happened to Keiki." The Ever-King drew a light breath. "The former ruler

of Kei was a lady-king, the Prophet, as I said to you earlier. The kings are raised to the status of gods, yet they are at heart all mortal. Their divinity is no guarantee that they will not stray from the path. The Prophet . . . fell in love with Keiki. She acted as his wife; she let no other woman approach him. As time went on she grew increasingly jealous. In the end, she exceeded herself, casting all other women out of her palace, then banishing them from the country entirely. Keiki protected her as she grew more extreme. When she began killing those women who remained in the kingdom, Keiki fell ill."

"What happened then?" asked Yoko, barely breathing.

"The Prophet lost the path due to her blind love for Keiki. Of course she never intended that he should die, nor would that have brought her joy. She had not strayed quite *that* far from the path. Ultimately she realized her folly and sought to make amends. The Prophet climbed Houzan, the Mountain of the Sage's Brush, near the center of the world, and there she relinquished her title. Heaven acquiesced, and Keiki was set free from the Prophet. Thus was Keiki saved from the losing-of-the-way."

"What happened to her then? To the Prophet, I mean."

"To become king is to die and be reborn as a god. When one has ceased to be king, that one may no longer live."

So, the former king of Kei died—she killed herself—to save Keiki.

"Keiki has already chosen you to be the new king. To claim your throne, you, too, must climb Houzan and there receive your mandate from Heaven; but this is little more than a formality. Once the pact has been made, you're as good as enthroned. The

will of Heaven is clear. You are the Glory-King. Nothing can change this. You understand?"

Yoko nodded slowly.

"It is the king's duty to rule his kingdom. You may abandon Kei and return to Wa if you so choose. But a kingdom without its king is ruined. And if your kingdom falls, Heaven will surely abandon you."

"You mean Keiki will suffer the . . . losing-of-the-way? And I'll die."

"It is most likely. However, these concerns are trifling compared to the fate of the people of Kei. Kings do not merely rule. They quell natural disasters and subdue the demons that would otherwise run wild. Yes, the demons will run. The storms will come, and drought, and flood. Famine and pestilence will scour the land, and the hearts of the people will bleed. The land itself will crumble, and the people, *your* people, will know untold suffering."

Yoko swallowed.

"There was another time," continued the Ever-King, "before this, when the kingdom of Kei lacked a ruler. Keiki took a long time in finding the Prophet after the king before her died, you see. During that time, the land was troubled and the people exhausted. He eventually did find the king and enthroned her, yet her rule lasted no more than six years. Worse, for the last of those years, Keiki had lost the way, and peace was scarce in the land. And now this. Many of the folk of Kei who lived close to En or Kou have abandoned their homes and fled across the borders. Yet many remain in Kei. Even now, they know terrible

hardships under the claws of demonkin and suffer natural calamities at every turn. There is only one way to bring them succor."

"The true king must sit upon the throne?"

"Precisely."

Yoko shook her head. "I can't do this."

"I think you can. I can see it in your eyes. You have the look of a king."

"I don't believe you."

"No? You are your own king, Yoko, responsible for your own actions. There are those who have not this responsibility, and they can never bear the mantle of kingship. One who cannot rule herself can never rule a kingdom."

"But I . . . I can't."

"No, you—"

"Shoryu," interrupted Enki. "Do not force her. The Glory-King must decide for herself what is to become of Kei. If she is ready to take responsibility for her actions, then those actions are hers to take."

The Ever-King sighed. "Of course. I will not force you. But allow me to make . . . a request. I've done everything in my power to save the people of Kei, but the coffers of En are not bottomless. I *ask* you to save your kingdom. Please."

"Let me think about it," said Yoko after a long pause, looking down at the ground. She hadn't the strength to look the Ever-King in the face.

"Um, excuse me?" It was Rakushun who broke the silence. "Would you happen to know which king has it in for Yoko?"

The Ever-King looked at Enki, but Enki looked aside. "Who do you believe it is?" asked the king, turning back to Rakushun.

"Well, it's just a guess, but, I was thinking . . . mightn't it be the Naze-King of Kou?"

Yoko stared at Rakushun. It took a moment for her to connect the worried-looking young man before her with the good-natured rat she knew.

"What makes you think this?"

"Well, I'm not sure, mind you, but when I found Yoko in the mountains, she had been run ragged. I can't believe that all the demons that had attacked her there were one kirin's sirei. And I sure hope there aren't that many demons living in the mountains naturally. Even if you figure that half of them were sirei, that's still too many to chalk up to coincidence. I think the whole kingdom had it in for her, that's what I think."

The Ever-King stroked his chin thoughtfully and nodded. "That may be so. Indeed, a short time ago I received a strongly worded request from the Naze-King to deliver to him any kaikyaku who may have come from his land into mine. Kou being the way it is, other kaikyaku have come here in the past, seeking solace; however, this is the first time I ever received such a direct request. Finding it odd, I had Enki look into it, and was surprised to find that indeed, someone in Kou is channeling funds to the impostor Joyei. Adding to this the recent decline in conditions in Kou, I determined that the Naze-King was likely the one behind the troubles of the Glory-King. And just yesterday, I received word that the kirin of Kou has lost the path."

"Sitsudou? The kirin of Kou?" muttered Rakushun, shaking his head. A grimace passed over his youthful features. "So Kou is ended."

"Isn't there anything that can be done?" Yoko asked, looking at the grim faces of the three around her.

"It would be an easy thing to advise the Naze-King, as a friend, but the Naze-King does not grant audiences these days. Even were I to meet him, if he is not already aware of the wrongness of his ways, there would be little I could do to convince him otherwise. If there is one way to stop him, it would be for the true Glory-King to receive her mandate and fill the vacant throne. I do not know what began the Naze-King's meddling in the affairs of Kei, but if it was his desire to install a puppet king and thereby control the affairs of his neighbor, an ascendant Glory-King would put an end to those ambitions."

The Ever-King turned his gaze to Yoko. His point was clear.

Yoko lowered her eyes. "I'll need some time."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Yoko was given a gorgeous, high-ceilinged suite in which to stay. The décor, the furniture, even the flagon of water and the slim glasses on the table were the height of elegance. The main room was large, with great glass-paned windows. There were fresh flowers arranged here and there, and a rich but subtle incense was burning. She could imagine the amazement a farmer from the outlands of Kou would feel if he saw such a place; Yoko was amazed enough herself, having grown accustomed to traveling on the cheap. She found it difficult to relax. For a while, she sat in the big room alone, thinking. Yet the single silver-embossed chair was uncomfortable to sit on, and she feared getting her fingerprints on the sleek surface of the ornamented lacquer table, so there was no leaning on that.

Pacing around the chamber, she noticed a doorway into a smaller side room. She went to it, thinking that perhaps this was a place to relax. The door to the smaller room was a thin three-paneled sliding door painted all over with an intricate floral design; it folded up along one side of the opening. There was a step up at the doorway, and the rest of the room was hidden from view by a single hanging silk curtain. Yoko drew the curtain aside to find a brocade comforter spreading from

the threshold to the far wall. If this meant that the entire room was her bed, it seemed like a bad joke. She could hardly picture herself lying on her side to think private thoughts on so vast an expanse of mattress, let alone sleeping on it.

Feeling very much out of place, Yoko went to the large windows that stretched from floor to ceiling at one end of the main chamber. The window frames were intricately detailed, and the glass itself was brightly colored. Beyond the gleaming panes she could see a terrace.

As the Ever-King had promised, she had been given a room with its own terrace overlooking the Cloud Sea.

Yoko opened a window, and the fresh sea breeze blew against her skin, pleasantly stirring the scent of the incense that hung around her. Opening the window farther, she stepped through it onto a large terrace, made of interconnected white stones, which hugged the curve of the building. She walked a short way along it, then leaned on the railing, looking down at the sea of clouds below. The moon was low, threatening to sink below this sea above the sky.

As Yoko stood there watching the waves crash on the rocks far below, she heard the pitter-patter of small footsteps behind her and turned to see a familiar gray-furred figure approaching.

"Out for a walk?"

Rakushun grinned. "Kind of. Couldn't sleep?"

"No. You either, Rakushun?"

"Who could sleep in a room like that! I found meself wishing we'd stayed in that cruddy inn, I did."

"My thoughts exactly," Yoko agreed.

The rat laughed out loud. "Now that's hardly a sentiment I'd expect from you. You've got your own palace out there, you know."

The smile faded from Yoko's face. "I do, don't I? I had been wondering."

Rakushun came to stand beside her. "The royal palace of Kei is in Gyouten, in the province of Yei. Goldenwave Palace, 'tis called."

Yoko nodded. She knew there had been a time when she would have dreamed of living in a palace like this, but now she found that the idea really didn't interest her. Rakushun fell silent for a while before speaking again.

"Say, Yoko."

"Yeah?"

"This false king—Joyei, was it? She's got Keiki, right?"

"So it seems."

"Well, I was thinking, if the Naze-King of Kou really didn't want you on that throne, there is something he could do."

"Kill Keiki, you mean?"

"Aye. If Keiki dies, so do you, right? You haven't actually been up Houzan to receive your mandate or nothing, so I'm not entirely sure what'd happen, but it seems likely that would be the way of it."

Yoko shivered. "I think so too. Because I made the pact with Keiki, I'm no longer human. That's why it's so hard for me to be injured, why I understand the language, why I can use the sword, why I was brought here over the Void Sea in the first place."

"Right, Yoko, and now the enemy has Keiki. You have to take the throne, if only to protect yourself—"

"I don't want to hear it," said Yoko, cutting him off.

"Yoko . . ."

"No, I'm not just being difficult. I know now what a king is, what a kirin is. I know what will happen if I don't accept this kingship. But I don't want to make this decision just to save myself. You understand?"

"Yeah, but—"

"I don't want anyone to think I made my decision out of desperation." Yoko laughed. "In the months after I came Over Here, I thought I might die at any moment. I made it through, though. I was lucky. So you see, I was ready to give up my life before this. I'm not going to let fear of death get in the way of me making my choice now."

Rakushun swallowed noisily.

"I know everyone's waiting for me to decide. But if I decide the way I want to live my life based on what they want, what follows won't be my responsibility, not entirely. That's why I want to think this through. You understand?"

Rakushun lifted his beady eyes and looked into Yoko's. "I can't figure why this is such a tough decision for you."

"It's tough, because I can't do what they're asking of me."

"Why not?"

"I know what kind of person I am, incomplete, half-baked, despicable. I'm no king. I'm no one special at all."

"Yoko, I don't think—"

"You say you're half human, Rakushun? Well, so am I. I might look like a person, but inside I'm just a beast."

"Yoko . . ."

Yoko clutched the terrace rail. The slender carved stone felt exquisitely delicate in her grasp. She looked down at the translucent water and through it at the lights of Kankyu, glowing like fireflies in a field of night. The steady beat of the waves sent up a gentle, rhythmic sound. It was a beautiful vista, yet she felt unworthy to witness it. Doubtless Goldenwave Palace in Gyouten was as beautiful. When she thought of herself there, she felt more disgust than longing.

Beside her, Rakushun sighed. "Every king is just a normal person before the kirin chooses them."

"No, I was still the same person even after the kirin chose me. I tried to steal, to threaten—I threatened other people so that I might live. I mistrusted others, abandoned you to save my own skin . . . I might even have killed you."

"But the Ever-King said you could do it."

"The Ever-King doesn't know how low I sank."

"I know you can do it, too, Yoko. And I'm the one you were thinking of killing. If even I can see it, it must be there."

Yoko glanced down at Rakushun. The rat, his head barely reaching her bellybutton, had stuck his pointed nose between the balusters to peer down at the sea of Heaven.

"I . . . I just can't," Yoko muttered, gazing out at the Cloud Sea. There was no answer. A small paw touched her arm, but by the time she looked at him again, Rakushun's gray-furred back was turned toward her.

"Rakushun."

"I can't blame you. I wouldn't know what to do meself if I was in your position. Just . . . think it through."

The rat began to walk away, his back still turned to Yoko, his hands raised as if to say he had done all he could and would do no more. Yoko watched him leave.

"You don't know everything, Rakushun," she muttered softly.

I know, said a voice in Yoko's head that was not her own.

Yoko's eyes opened wide, and she looked around hastily, but of course there was no one there.

You were never entirely alone. I know. I know everything.

"Joyu?"

Seek the throne. You can do it.

Yoko couldn't answer the voice in her head, partly because she was so surprised and partly because of what the voice was saying.

I disobey orders now. Forgive me.

Yoko remembered Keiki telling Joyu to act as though he wasn't there. Was that why he'd never answered her before?

You called me a monster, whined to have me taken from you. My silence was your punishment.

"What a fool I've been," Yoko muttered. The only reply was the whistling of the night wind and the low crash of the waves far below.

The next morning, Yoko was awakened by a female servant and reluctantly followed her to the royal breakfast table. She

answered the expectant stares of the others with a shake of her head. Rakushun, in rat form today, sat with his head drooping, stroking his whiskers. The Ever-King and Enki also seemed a bit crestfallen. *I'm not ready to tell them.*

"Kei is your kingdom; its people are your people. Do as you will," the Ever-King said with a wry smile. "However, I must request that you allow us to attempt the rescue of Keiki. Especially . . . if the Glory-King wishes to abandon her throne. I would like to save the minister, at least, for the kingdom's sake. What say you?"

Yoko nodded. "I've yet to make my decision, but I have no objection to rescuing Keiki. How do you intend to do this?"

"I see no other way but to wrest him from their grasp by force. We have information that Keiki is likely in Sei Province, surrounded by the main body of the false king's army."

"I do have one question. If we can rescue Keiki, will I be able to go home?"

The Ever-King nodded again. "Kirin can create the shoku. In your current form, you are able to cross the Void Sea, so I cannot see why there would be any difficulty. If you so wish to go home, then Keiki could send you; and if he should object, I would have Enki do it."

How generous, thought Yoko. He could just as easily have threatened never to send her home if she would not agree to become the next Glory-King.

But Enki immediately spoke up. "Whatever happens, *I'm* not making a shoku for you. Convince Keiki to take you if you want to go home that badly."

The words earned him a stern glare from the Ever-King. "Rokutah!"

"You seem to be unaware of this, so I'll tell you," continued the youthful kirin. "When a shoku comes, disasters follow. If you were just sending a lone kirin Over There, the worst you might suffer is a strong wind. But move a king, and you will do great damage both to this world and the other."

"To Wa as well?"

"Yup. You're mixing the two together, after all. I heard some terrible things happened in Kou during the shoku that brought you here; but all in all, it was pretty light considering that a king passed over the Void Sea. I doubt we'd be so lucky next time, and I've no intention of helping you."

"Well, if I do end up going home, I'll be sure to do it in such a way as to not inconvenience you, Enki."

"I'll see that you don't," the boy said, scowling.

"But Yoko," the Ever-King added quietly, "you do understand that you would not be safe, even should you return home."

"I know that." *As long as the Naze-King wants me dead, I'll never escape his demons. He'd probably send them Over There again. I would wreck this land on my departure, and when I arrived I'd come bringing a host of demonkin monstrosities. I would descend upon my hometown like a goddess of death. Me going home would be terrible for both worlds—for everyone that I know. That's assuming the false king doesn't kill Keiki outright, and thereby kill me, of course. So how come I still can't make up my mind?*

"What if we deal with the Naze-King before I go home?"

"That we cannot do. At least, I will not assist you."

"Why not?"

The Ever-King shook his head. "Know this. There are three transgressions not permitted to any king. The first is to violate the heavenly precepts and deny the way of righteousness. The second is to reject one's mandate and choose death over royal responsibility. The third and final transgression is to invade another country, even with the intention of preventing war."

Yoko nodded. "But what about the plan you just spoke of? What about going into Kei in force to rescue Keiki?"

"If the new Glory-King were to stand with us, it would legitimize the army as the true army of Kei. We would merely be providing assistance at the Glory-King's request."

"I see."

The Ever-King smiled broadly. "I will lend you the use of the armies of En to secure the return of Keiki. Will you do so?"

Yoko smiled bitterly and lowered her head. "I'm left with little choice." She took a deep breath. *Now I'm ready.* "I ask for your assistance. And . . . I am sorry to have disappointed you with my indecision until now."

Enki laughed, his face taut. "Shoryu just wants more taika kings, you know. Don't let him push you around. It's been lonely for him, being the only one of his kind."

"The only one?"

"Yes, I alone among the kings of this world am a taika, from Over There. I have heard tell of some in the past, but they were few in number."

"But Enki," said Yoko, turning to look at the boy-kirin, "you're a taika, too, aren't you?"

"That I am. It's just me, Shoryu here, and Taiki. You make the fourth in our little circle."

"Taiki . . . that's Tai's kirin?"

"Yup. The fledgling of the outer kingdom of Tai."

"Fledgling?"

"Yes, a kirin who is not full grown."

"And are *you* full grown, Enki?" Yoko asked him, with a smile.

"What? Of course I am. When a kirin matures, their outward appearance is frozen for all time."

"So that means you matured earlier than Keiki did . . . and that's why you appear younger?"

"That's right," the kirin said, his pride evident.

The Ever-King chuckled. "And Taiki was not fully matured?"

"Nope."

"Past tense?" asked Yoko.

Enki frowned and looked over at the Ever-King. "Taiki is no more. At least, this is what we have been told. The kingdom of Tai is in the midst of a big war. Taiki and the Peace-King are both gone—missing, or worse."

Yoko sighed. "Sounds like mine is not the only kingdom with problems."

"Indeed. Mortals excel at making trouble. The kirin of Tai's mortal name Over There, incidentally, was Takasato. He was roughly the same age as you are, I'd think."

"He was a boy, like you?"

"Yes. We form a kirin's title by putting *-ki* after the kingdom's name, if we are speaking of one who is male. A female kirin's

title is made with *-rin*—so a girl kirin of Tai would be named Tairin, you see? Taiki was a handsome black kirin."

"A black kirin?"

"Yes. Have you ever seen a kirin in its true form?"

"No—only in human shape," said Yoko.

"Their pelts are lion-yellow, their arching backs are multicolored, and their manes are of gold—at least most are this way."

"Gold, like your hair?"

"Yup. Of course, this isn't really my hair. It's my mane."

Oh, of course, Yoko thought.

"But Taiki was black, like the color of fine-polished steel. His pelt was ebon, his back silver—well, not just silver; there were other colors as well."

"Is that rare?"

"Quite. There are very few black kirin in the historical records. Apparently there have also been red kirin, and even white kirin, but I've never seen any of those."

Yoko nodded, trying hard to imagine what a black kirin with a back of silver would look like.

"If Taiki is truly dead, then the Peace-King cannot be alive. And it would follow that a fruit would have grown on Houzan, the Mountain of the Sage's Brush—the eggfruit of the new Taiki. Yet there are no signs of this."

"A Taiki eggfruit?"

"The tree upon which kirin grow is high on Houzan's slopes. Whenever a kirin dies, an eggfruit bearing a new kirin appears there. If Taiki had been killed, then the next Taiki would be

growing on Houzan . . . but there has been no new fruiting, so he must still live."

"Do kirin have parents?"

"None, except for those of us who were taika, of course. Normal kirin don't even have names, only their titles."

"Like Keiki?"

Enki nodded. Suddenly it seemed to Yoko that a kirin's life must be very sad. As though he read her thoughts, Enki made a sour face. "Kirin are pitiful creatures. They are born for the king, with no parents or siblings. They have not even a name of their own, and once they've chosen their king they become mere servants to be used as the king wills. And in the end, when they die, it's because of the king. They don't even get a grave," he added, with a glance at the Ever-King. His master looked away. Enki frowned and gave a soft sigh.

"No grave?" asked Yoko. Enki flinched at her words. "They don't make a grave for you?"

"No, they have a grave," replied the Ever-King with an ironic smile. "They are interred along with their king. Only, they are buried in spirit alone; there is no body."

"Why not?" *Do they simply evaporate?* Yoko wondered to herself.

"Please," said Enki, rolling his eyes.

"There's nothing to hide," the king went on. "You know that the kirin use demons as their servants. They form a pact with these demons, just as they do with the king. The pact-bound demons follow their kirin's orders. In return, when the kirin dies, they may eat of his flesh."

Yoko's eyes widened as she looked at the Ever-King, then at Enki.

The taiho shrugged. "So, now you know. We kirin are pretty tasty, or so I hear. Who cares, anyway? It's not like I'll mind when it's my turn. I'll be dead. If you have pity for us, Yoko, save it for Keiki. Don't let him down."

Yoko had no response. Then another thought occurred to her. "I'd think it must have been difficult for the Naze-King of Kou—he must have really let down Kourin."

The Ever-King raised an eyebrow. "Who knows what the Naze-King is thinking?"

Beside him, Enki's face grew clouded. "To interfere in the dealings of another kingdom is to lose the mandate of Heaven. If even that fact was not enough to prevent the Naze-King's stupidity, he must've had a powerful motivation."

"I wonder . . ."

"He must've known that his foolish acts could only lead to personal loss. Yet sometimes we all transgress, even when we know it to be wrong. People are fools. And when times are rough, they become ever more foolish."

Yoko's heart was heavy. She could only nod. "I'm scared . . ."

"Scared?"

"Yes. I don't know if I could do any better."

The Ever-King laughed, not unkindly. "The kirin always obeys the king. However, this does not mean that he does so willingly or without complaint. Never forget that you are a foolish human, and your other half will save you."

"My other half?" asked Yoko, confused.

"Yes, your kirin."

Yoko nodded, then glanced down at the seat to her right.

There lay a single sword—her sword—the ancient treasure of the kingdom of Kei.

The Ever-King said that the Water Monkey Sword can show the past, the future, and places as far distant as a thousand li. If I could master it, might I be able to find out what the Naze-King of Kou was thinking?

The breakfast table conversation became a council of war, where Yoko soon learned that most kingdoms had two armies. One consisted of regiments controlled by the provincial governors, operating solely within the provinces. The other was the kingsmen, under direct control of the king.

The Ever-King told her that it would take over a month for mounted knights from En to reach Iryu, the capital of Sei Province in the kingdom of Kei. He also assured her that Keiki didn't have that long. And so, a special unit of one hundred and twenty elite soldiers on flying mounts would be prepared for the assault on Iryu. They would gallop through the skies to their destination, where they would strike without warning.

As soon as this was decided, the Ever-King and Enki departed. They did not return for lunch, and they were still absent at the serving of the evening meal.

Unsure of what she should be doing, but determined to be useful, Yoko finally left Rakushun in the royal sitting room and

returned to her chambers. There, she took up her sword and placed it upon the table, seating herself squarely in front of it.

I am the master of this sword.

She knew that in theory it was possible for her to use the blade as a kind of oracle, as the Ever-King had told her, but she still doubted her ability to do so. Yet, she'd never had a greater need for information than she did now. Despite the doubts that gnawed at her, she decided she had to try.

She had no idea how to go about forcing the sword to show her something, but she told herself that it couldn't be that difficult.

Before crossing over the Void Sea, Yoko had dreamt for many nights of darkness and the sound of dripping water. Surely that had somehow been related to the visions the sword had shown her, which were always accompanied by a dripping sound. Yoko assumed that the weapon had been trying to warn her of approaching enemies—it had sent her its visions in dreams as a way to protect its master.

But wait—back then I hadn't met Keiki yet. I'd agreed to no pact. How did the sword know it was mine? Which comes first? Selection by the kirin, or the mandate of Heaven?

Yoko had asked the Ever-King as much. Had she been born into the mandate? Or was it Keiki's decision that set the wheels of her fate in motion?

It was Enki who had replied, however, saying only that he simply didn't know. "I've no idea why I chose this guy. There was no reason, as far as I can tell. I just *knew* he was the one. Maybe knowing who should be king is just in a kirin's nature."

Whatever the reason, Yoko knew she had a link with the sword. Surely she should be able to communicate with it.

She drew the blade in the darkened room. She stared at the polished steel.

The Naze-King of Kou. Show him to me.

So far the sword had only shown her visions of her home, the world she'd left behind; but she assumed this was because she had always been thinking about going home.

What does the Naze-King intend?

Yoko wasn't sure she had what it took to become a good king, but at least she might learn from watching a bad one.

A wan luminescence covered the blade. Vague shapes began to form in the light. Yoko heard the high-pitched, far-off *drip, drip, drip* of water. She stared at the vision and waited for it to come into focus.

She saw a white wall. In the wall was a glass window, and through that, a garden. She had seen that garden before. It was the one in front of her home, back in Japan.

No, this isn't what I wanted to see.

Yoko unfocused her thoughts, and the vision disappeared. The sword lost its luster and lay there in the darkness, cold. She had failed.

"It's just going to take more than one try," she said to herself, still staring at the sword. She'd never before seen more than one vision in a night; but before she had time to wonder if there was some sort of limit on what the sword could show her in an evening, the blade began to glow once more.

Again, she saw the garden in front of her house.

Yoko frowned. This time she kept her focus on the vision, at the same time thinking of what she wanted to see. The vision blurred, rippling like disturbed water in a pool. The ripples cleared and Yoko saw her room.

No!

Next she saw her school.

No!

She tried several more times, but all that came were scenes from Over There. She saw her house, her school, even her friends' houses. The blade would not show her anything from this world.

It's no better than the scabbard, Yoko thought. *A blue monkey, sassy, impertinent, and impossible to control.*

At the same time, she realized the failure was partly her fault, because she was unable to relinquish her homeland entirely. Knowing this made her try all the harder.

Resolutely Yoko kept staring at the blade, struggling for what must have been hours to gain some control over what she saw. Finally a new scene came—a vision of a town with a familiar-looking wall.

I did it, she thought as the vision grew clearer. Slowly it resolved into the image of a town gate and the road before it.

The road was slick with blood. People lay scattered, fallen on the ground. Some wailed in pain while others merely bled in silence. Standing in the middle of it was a young boy with eyes of shadow.

No—that's me!

"Stop it!"

Yoko shook the vision out of her mind. It was Goryou, where she had abandoned Rakushun.

She felt numb. *Did I really look like that? Could I have been so cruel?*

She tossed the sword down onto the floor with a clatter. Then she laughed derisively at herself for being so scared of a vision.

It's only the truth, hrmm? That was what the blue monkey would have said, if he were alive.

It was the truth. She didn't have the right to avert her eyes. Rather, she should look at it straight on. If she turned her eyes away from her own mistakes, there would be no end to her foolishness.

She grabbed the hilt and lifted the sword once again. Steadying her breath, she gazed hard into the blade. Again the vision of the gates before Goryou came swimming out of the metal. Yoko looked at herself, standing by the road. Her eyes were dark, with a wild look in them. They were looking at Rakushun.

I'm wondering if I should go back and kill him.

Then she saw people running out of the town, and herself fleeing down the road. As she ran off, the vision wavered; now she saw herself standing on a mountain path. She watched as she turned her back on the kind sugar peddlers who offered to help her.

A moment later she saw Takkee, and then the old kaikyaku Seizo. She saw the families of the men who had been killed by demons while trying to take Yoko to the magistrate. They were

weeping. She heard them mourning, and through their sobs she heard them cursing her, the kaikyaku, for bringing them this misfortune.

She saw the destruction of Kasai after the demon's attack there. She saw the rows of bodies lined up in the central square in Goryou, and huddled refugees from Kei outside the walls of some other town.

Determinedly Yoko sat, watching the visions stream by. As she watched, she came to understand that trying to stop the painful images would only make them come stronger, more unpredictable; she had to watch, to let them in—and as she did so, the scenes gradually came closer and closer to what she wanted to see.

She saw a palace, and there, a thin, weakened woman.

The woman spoke. "*We need no other women in Gyouten.*"

"*But—*" It was Keiki who protested. Yoko realized that the frail woman was actually the late king of Kei, the one known as the Prophet.

"*The order has been given; all those who remain are in defiance of my law,*" the Prophet said weakly. "*They are criminals. Need we delay the trying and sentencing of criminals?*" Only the woman's eyes had life. Her skin was white as a corpse, and the stain of illness clung to her sunken cheeks and rode the cordlike muscles of her emaciated neck. Suddenly, Yoko saw demons ransacking villages, towns burned to the ground in civil conflict, fields stripped bare under an onslaught of cicadas and rats. Flooding rivers spilled into the fields, where bodies floated among fragments of the ravaged crops.

All this because the kingdom is without its king?

How often she had heard people in this world worrying about the destruction of the kingdom or state, and how little she had understood. Those words would have meant nothing to her when she was living in Japan, but now she understood why she heard them so often here.

The next thing she saw was a mountain path.

There were two people standing on the path. One wore a death's hood of dark cloth; the other had flowing hair of pure gold. Yoko could see several beasts milling around them.

"*Forgive me,*" said the one with golden hair. She hid her face in her hands, but Yoko was certain it was the woman she had met in the mountains.

The one who drove the sword through my palm. That must be Kourin . . .

"*It is, of course,* me *of whom you ask forgiveness, I hope.*"

The one wearing the death's hood drew back his cowl, revealing the face of an aged man. The wrinkles ran deep in his skin, yet he was large in stature and sturdily built. A brilliantly colored parrot rested on his shoulder.

"*She seemed a weak girl. I'm sorry you didn't kill her, but she will not survive long, lost in these mountains. It is unfortunate she had already made the pact,*" the man said, though he did not seem terribly concerned. His voice was like stone, cold and without emotion. "*So, she will either die of exhaustion among these peaks*

or wander into a village where she will be caught. Either way . . . Taiho?"

"Yes?" Kourin looked up warily.

"I will not be defied again. You'll kill the girl for me next time, be it right or wrong."

Yoko realized that when this man said "the girl" he was talking about her. That had to mean he was . . .

The Naze-King!

The Naze-King shook his head. *"Weak and timid! She is no vessel fit to become a king."* He turned his cold face toward one of the beasts near him. *"You went all the way to Hourai to find her? You have failed sorely indeed."*

The beast was much like a stag in form, yet it had only a single, stunted antler growing out of its forehead, making it look something like a unicorn. Its mane was a rich flow of gold, its pelt was gold-flecked yellow, and its back was spotted like a deer's in a pattern that glowed with a marvelous multihued brilliance.

"You have ill luck in masters, don't you, Taiho of Kei?"

Taiho of Kei? That's Keiki . . . ? So that's what a kirin looks like.

Yoko realized she had to be viewing a scene from the past, from the mountains near Hairou, where she had escaped from the prison cart after the demon-hounds' attack. The figure she had seen out of the corner of her eye, the one she had thought was Keiki, had in fact been Kourin; but Keiki, a prisoner in beast form, had also been there. It was to him, and not the figure of Kourin, that Joyu had called out *Taiho.*

"If she is so young and helpless, why do we not simply leave her to her own fate?" Kourin asked quietly. *"Two of the people of Kou—*

your people—have died today. Please, let it end now." Her tear-filled eyes looked up at the Naze-King. The expression was the same she had worn when she met Yoko on that other mountain path.

"*People die. This is the way of the world,*" replied her master indifferently.

"*Heaven will not permit this. I fear Kou will be punished. It has happened before.*"

"*And I have already done enough to earn my punishment. Your words of caution do little good to me now. My path has been chosen; Kou shall sink. I would have Kei join her at the bottom. I will take the Glory-King with me.*"

"*You resent the taika so?*"

The Naze-King laughed quietly. "*I do not resent; I detest. You know that Over There, children are born from women's bellies? You know this?*"

"*I do know it, but what has that to do with your actions?*"

"*Do you not find it unclean?*"

"*I do not.*"

"*I do. The moment they are born from a woman's belly, the taika are marked as people of that world. They should not be here. They do not belong.*"

"*Heaven does not agree with you on this matter. Is there not already a taika king? It is defying the will of Heaven that is unclean.*"

The Naze-King gave an impatient laugh. "*Then we are in disagreement.*"

"*It would seem so, master,*" replied the kirin, her voice as soft as a spring wind through the trees.

"Master. Yes, I am your master. And you must follow your master's orders. You'll follow the girl and finish her. Do not allow her to escape the bounds of my land alive. We will place kingsmen along the border with Kei. She will doubtless attempt to return there."

"Let's abandon this unclean girl, master. You say she's young, you say she is an unfit vessel; why then go to the extreme of killing her to prevent her from ascending the jeweled throne? Is she not bound to fail?"

"No neighbor of Kou will be ruled by a taika king," said the Naze-King, and he sighed deeply.

"Then what will you do with the taiho of Kei?"

"Keiki I will give to Joyei. The presence of a kirin at her side will silence the governors who oppose her."

"Even if they are fooled for the time being, they will soon find cause to suspect. You have wrapped Keiki's horn to prevent him from assuming human form. He cannot even speak, bound in this way. What minister would cripple himself so? Please, stop this. Heaven cannot permit these transgressions."

"I do not ask for anyone's permission."

"I applaud your resolve, master, but what of your people?"

"The people of Kou are luckless. Should I die, perhaps a wise ruler will take my place. In the long run, this is all for their good."

"You speak madness . . ." Kourin's voice trailed off, and she covered her face in her hands once again.

"Perhaps I, too, was an unfit vessel to be king," said the Naze-King softly.

Maybe, thought Yoko, *his voice is so cold because he has already abandoned all hope.*

"You, and Heaven, failed in your choice."

"I do not believe it."

"But it is true. My reign will end after only fifty short years. En has had five hundred, Sou nearly six. My time was but a brief moment compared to theirs; but it is clear this was all I was fit for."

"If you changed your heart now, your rule could yet endure."

"No. It is too late, Taiho."

Kourin hung her head.

"I received a charge, and I have failed. I was meant to be a guardsman in the outlands and so end my days, yet I was favored by a luck that knew no bounds of law or reason. Alas, I had not the capacity to receive it in full. I could only clasp to it, dreaming of greatness, for a mere fifty years."

"Please, do not say 'mere.' There are many kings who ended with shorter reigns than yours."

"Indeed. Like the Prophet. Kei has always been a tumultuous land, poorer than Kou by far. Some may call my people lowly when compared to those of En and Sou, but the wise know we are far better off than the wretched folk of Kei."

"Yet the kingdoms of En and Sou were not always rich."

"I know this. And I did what I could to improve conditions in Kou. I did! But for all my progress, the Ever-King and the Priest-King made more. And the people still deride me, saying we are poorer than our neighbors. They are as much as saying that I'm not the king those others are."

"Surely this is not so."

"I have no desire to vie with the Ever-King or the Priest-King anymore. But Kei is different. Kei is poorer than Kou. What would

I do should the new king ascend and Kei become wealthier than Kou? We alone would be left to suffer in squalor, and I would be known as the fool king."

"The only foolishness I can see is your seeming desire to lose the mandate of Heaven." The challenge was plain in Kourin's voice.

"Wa is a rich country. Listen to any kaikyaku's tales and you'll know this to be true. And the Ever-King, returned from Wa himself, is blessed with a rich land in this world, too. The taika are different from those of us who are born here. How can I not fear the new Glory-King when I see how rich En's taika has become? The folk of Wa may hold some secret means of drawing prosperity from their people. How foolish I would look when all around me rose to such heights!"

"What you are saying—this *is foolishness."*

The Naze-King laughed bitterly. *"So it is. Horribly foolish. But I've gone too far to turn back. Nor would turning back now change Kou's fate. The kingdom will perish, and I will die. But I say it again: I shall not die alone. The taika of Kei will fall with me."*

No!

"Ridiculous!" Yoko shouted, and the vision ended. Weakly, Yoko lowered the sword. "What is he thinking?"

She thought she knew. He couldn't stand being left behind, and it was easier to drag those around him down than to try to catch up.

It happens all the time.

"He is lord of his kingdom," said she aloud, "yet he cannot see the suffering of his people. He transgresses against the laws of this world, and for what? Pride?" How many people had already perished because of his actions? And if the kingdom

of Kou were destroyed by the course he had set, the death toll would be far greater still.

"*People are fools. And when they know hardship, they become even more foolish.*" Enki's voice echoed in her ear.

Fifty years stuck between En and Sou, watching the Ever-King and the Priest-King outstrip his every effort. Fifty years, but to the Naze-King it must have seemed an eternity.

It was a path onto which Yoko herself might well step. Kei, too, was between En and Sou. Could she truly say she wouldn't share the Naze-King's fears? His doubts?

"I'm scared," muttered Yoko. "I'm truly scared."

Yoko stepped out onto the terrace for a breath of night air and found that she was not the only one who'd had that idea.

"Rakushun!" she called out when she saw the rat standing a short way off, peering under the railing at the Cloud Sea. His tail twitched slightly. "Still couldn't sleep?"

"A lot of things on me mind."

"Care to share?"

Rakushun gave a slow, emphatic nod. "I was wondering how I could change your mind."

Yoko smiled grimly. She stood next to her friend as she had the night before, and hung over the railing, watching the cloud waves crash against the cliff side below. "Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Why do you want to make me king?"

"I don't want to make you king—you already *are* king, Yoko. The kirin chose you. Yet you talk about throwing it all away. Can't you see that's a horrible mistake? When a king abandons her country, everyone suffers—both her and all her people."

"But the people of Kei might be even worse off if I accept the kingship!"

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"I think you can do it, Yoko."

"I-I can't."

"But you can," snapped Rakushun, then he sighed. "Yoko . . . I thought you were braver than this."

"It's not only me I would be responsible for," she replied, gazing down at the waves. "If it were just me, just my life in the balance, I might give it a try. I can be responsible for me, at least. But it's not like that, is it?"

"The folk of Kei are waiting for the day they can return home."

"Yes. To a rich, peaceful country. Can I give that to them? I don't think so."

"The Ever-King said that whoever is chosen by the kirin always has the qualifications to be a good ruler. You're qualified!"

"If that's really true, then why is Kei in ruins? Why is Kou so poor? I think it's one thing to have the qualifications, and another to live up to them."

"But you can do it, Yoko!"

"You know what confidence without a basis in fact is called, Rakushun? It's called arrogance."

Rakushun's slight figure drooped.

"I'm not being a coward. Maybe if I didn't have reasons for being so unsure, maybe then you could call me a coward. But I have plenty of reasons for doubting my ability. I've learned a lot during my time in this world, more than I ever learned at home. Above all else, I've learned that I'm a fool."

"Yoko . . ."

"This isn't just me putting myself down as a way of avoiding responsibility. I really was—am still—an idiot! I know that now, and I'm trying to change. I have that ahead of me, Rakushun; I'll work at becoming a better person, but it's going to take time. If being chosen by a kirin to become king is proof that I'm qualified, then maybe that's something I can aim for—but that's not what I am now."

Rakushun muttered something and let go of the railing. He shuffled around the wide terrace, pacing back and forth several times before stopping and raising a bushy eyebrow at Yoko.

"You're scared, aren't you?" he said.

"Of course I'm scared."

"A big responsibility's been placed on your shoulders, and you're afraid to accept it."

"That's right."

"Then you need to get Keiki back quickly, Yoko."

Yoko turned around to see Rakushun standing on his own shadow.

"Being a king isn't something you have to do alone," the beastling went on. "That's what your kirin is for. Think about it: If people are so flawed, why doesn't Heaven just make the kirin king? You think you aren't worthy. You think you're shallow. And you know what? You're probably right. But the kirin chose you! Maybe it's because the kirin *needs* someone imperfect?"

"What do you mean?"

"One has too much, one has too little; put them together and it's perfect. You alone wouldn't be enough to rule a kingdom, but neither would Keiki. That's why the king and the kirin both work together. You say you're half a person? Same goes for the kirin. Two halves that form a whole, see? I suspect that's how it works with the Ever-King and Enki, too."

Yoko stood looking down at the white stone of the terrace.

"There're some people who would be so ecstatic to learn they were chosen to be king, they'd accept at the drop of a hat—and you know what? They wouldn't be the right ones for the job! I think it's only *because* you're afraid when you think of being responsible for so many people that you're qualified to sit on the jeweled throne."

"I don't see it that way."

"Believe in Keiki's choice."

"I—" began Yoko.

"And it wouldn't hurt to believe in yourself a little, too, Yoko. If you think you might have the makings of a king in five years, why not start now? I don't see the point in waiting."

"B-but . . ." Yoko stammered.

Rakushun cut her off. "Keiki chose you to be king. That means that right now no one in this world or the other is more fit than you to be the new Glory-King of Kei. The will of Heaven is the will of the people. There's no would-be king that could bring more happiness to the people of Kei than *you*, Yoko. Why can't you just face that fact? The people of Kei belong to you, as you belong to the kingdom of Kei."

Yoko shook her head.

"If you want to become a better person, go sit on your throne and become a good king. I can't think of a better way! Sure, the king has a lot of responsibilities. So what? Sometimes it helps to have to rise to a challenge."

"But what if I don't succeed?"

"Your heart's in the right place; you have to succeed! Maybe not right away, but you'll get there. And you will have the kirin and all your people to show you the way. With that many teachers, you're sure to learn something before too long."

Yoko stood silently for a long time, facing the darkened sea. "If I become king . . . I won't be able to go home, will I?"

"You still want to go back to Wa?"

"I'm not sure."

"You're not sure?"

Yoko nodded. "Honestly, I don't think my life Over There was all that special. And, now, for that matter, my life here isn't half as bad as it used to be."

"Right!"

"But still . . . since the night I passed over the Void Sea, it seems like all I've been able to think about is going back home."

"Well, I can sympathize with that."

"I have parents there, Rakushun. And friends. I can't stand here and tell you they were the best parents, or the best friends, but that's not their fault. I was an incomplete person; how could I have hoped to have complete relationships with the people around me? But if I went home now, I know I could do better. I would start over from the beginning. I could make a place for myself in the world into which I was born, a place where I truly belonged. I regret what a fool I was in the past . . . and I want another chance. I *know* I could do it right this time."

Her hands gripped the railing tightly; a single tear fell on her knuckle. "Even if I didn't have the chance to do it over again, even if I don't belong in that world anymore, I miss it so much, Rakushun. I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye. Maybe I wouldn't feel this way if I'd just had time to get ready, to say my farewells."

"I never thought you had an easy time of it."

"I . . . I just can't imagine giving up going home. Not after I've gone so far and done so much."

"Aye."

"Yet I know that if I went home right now, I would regret that decision too. Either way, I'll miss whichever world I've left behind. I want both, but I know I have to choose one."

Something warm and soft lightly brushed against her cheek, wiping away another tear. It was a hand—a human hand.

"Rakushun . . ."

"Hey, don't look behind you. I'm not exactly dressed for the occasion."

Yoko let loose a laugh, and with it came more tears.

"And don't laugh. What was I supposed to do? I couldn't reach your cheek with those paws."

Yoko bit her lip and nodded.

"Listen, Yoko. When you have two choices, and you don't know which to choose, you have to pick the thing that you *should* do. You'll have regrets either way. But if you're going to regret something, you might as well make it the lesser of the two."

"I know . . ."

"Do what you should do. It'll be that much less on your conscience."

"Yes . . ." The palm of his hand was warm on her cheek.

"And . . . I want to see what kind of kingdom you could make."

Yoko's eyes opened wide, and she began to turn around, then stopped herself at the last moment. Dizzily she fixed her gaze on the sky and the crashing waves below. "Thanks, Rakushun," she said at length. "Thanks."

For the attack on Iryu, the Ever-King gave Yoko a creature called a *kitsuryou* to ride: a beautiful flying horse with a red mane, white stripes, and eyes of gold. She found that she had no trouble controlling the beast; Joyu, it seemed, was skilled in the art.

The king had suggested that she might wish to stay in Kankyu, but Yoko was determined to take part in the assault. There were over six thousand troops defending Iryu; every

available warrior would be needed to tip the balance. Besides, this was a battle for Keiki, and for Kei—Yoko's own kingdom. She had no business hiding.

It had taken great courage for her to stand before the Ever-King and Enki, lords of their own realm for over five hundred years, and announce that she would indeed take on the mantle of the Glory-King. She knew very little about this world, and almost nothing of its politics or the history of its kingdoms; and she still felt that she did not have the merit to deserve the name of king. But she had decided that she would accept the role nonetheless, and live up to it to the best of her abilities. That had to be enough. If it was necessary for her to fight now, she would fight. If she was ever to become who she wanted to become, she would have to start somewhere, and hiding in Shadowlore Palace would get her nowhere.

Yoko was not the only one who refused to remain in hiding. Rakushun insisted that he, too, should take part in the coming campaign. Yoko had pleaded with him to stay in Kankyu, but he was adamant. "Then help me," Enki had told him; and so, as the strike force gathered at the palace, the beastling left with the boy-kirin on another mission. Kirin abhorred bloodshed, so the two would not see battle. Instead their plan was to visit the governors of the various provinces of Kei that had fallen in with the false king's army, hoping to persuade them to abandon the impostor.

On the morning of the rescue attempt, one hundred twenty beasts and riders set out from Shadowlore, flying swiftly above the Cloud Sea. Their enemy Joyei's armies numbered at least

twenty thousand. Of these, nearly six thousand troops were gathered in Sei Province. The Ever-King himself assured Yoko that his picked force stood no chance in open battle against such odds.

"We fly today for the kirin alone," he said. "If we can rescue Keiki, it will buy us time to prepare for the next phase of the struggle. And if we give the false king's armies cause to suspect that the one they risk their lives to defend is an impostor, so much the better. If we can open the eyes of even three governors, the balance of power will shift in our favor."

Getting Keiki back, he told Yoko, was only the first step.

"And we have a chance of doing that with only one hundred twenty warriors?" she asked.

The Ever-King favored her with a smile. "I have done what I can. We may not match their numbers, but each of my riders is worth at least ten of theirs. And we ride above the clouds. That will limit the numbers that can rise to greet us. Also, it's doubtful they know that the Glory-King has joined us. I went to find you personally to insure that word did not get out."

So that's why he came all the way to Yosho to greet us.

"Though I must admit," the king added, as if he'd read her thoughts, "I was also driven by a certain amount of curiosity as to who this new Glory-King was. Regardless, Joyei will not expect En to move against her, certainly not in force. So although we are few in number, we will have the element of surprise in our favor, attacking from above the clouds. The rest depends upon you, Yoko."

"On me?"

"If you succeed in impressing the false king's army, it will greatly lessen the need for further military action. No people would willingly fight for a false king, you see. If they are shown beyond a doubt that you are the new king, then Joyei's soldiers will give up Keiki of their own accord."

If I succeed . . .

"Have no doubt—you *are* the king. Do not forget it. A king is, in truth, little more than a dressed up servant, but few realize how human we really are. Always carry yourself as if you were the most important person in your kingdom, and you will be."

"I'm not sure that's an attitude that comes naturally to me," Yoko said with a deep sigh. "I could do it if I had the confidence, but where do I get that from?"

"Confidence?" the Ever-King replied, laughing aloud. "The kirin chose you. If you fear you lack the requisite confidence, take it up with him."

Yoko rolled her eyes. "Is that how one becomes a great leader?"

"Certainly. It has worked for me, at least. When I am concerned about something, I take it up with Enki. If he can't resolve my worries, then I do whatever it is that needs to be done myself."

"I'll try to remember that."

The Kei that Yoko saw with her own eyes was far worse than the little she had seen in the visions the sword had shown her. Even when viewed from high above through the translucent

expanse of the Cloud Sea, the ruin of the land was evident. In this season, the buds of new crops should have been appearing in the fields; yet most croplands she saw had been left fallow and were rife with weeds as if long abandoned. The villages and towns the riders passed over seemed dead; no one walked the streets. In some places the remnants of burned-out buildings stood like hollow gravestones, while in others there were merely scorched outlines where the houses had burned to the ground entirely.

Yoko had thought Kou was a poor land, but it was no comparison to Kei. She remembered the refugees she had seen huddling under town walls, and her heart ached. She felt their desperate wish to go home. She knew how hard it was not to have a warm place to sleep, a place to call your own.

The Ever-King's rescue force had been flying for half a day above the Cloud Sea, watching the land roll past below, when at last they reached Iryu, the capital of Sei Province. It turned out that Iryu was another impossibly tall mountain stretching high enough to pierce the Cloud Sea, with the stronghold of the provincial governor clinging to its peak. Somewhere in that fortress, Keiki waited.

When Yoko could at last see the governor's stronghold in the distance, she became aware of a number of black specks rising like birds from the castle walls. The flying defenders of Iryu were coming to greet them.

Fighting meant killing. Yoko had killed many things since coming to this world, but never another person. She had never had the courage to carry the weight of a human death in her

heart. But when she determined to accompany the rescue force to Iryu, she had made up her mind: She would kill if she must, but she wouldn't let her commitment to her mission lessen the weight of any lives she took. She knew she would remember each one. *I will not forget them. It's the least I can do.*

"Are you ready?" the Ever-King shouted.

Yoko nodded.

"Do not doubt, and do not hesitate. I would not have you come to us only to be taken away so soon."

"I won't die that easily," Yoko replied. "I'm a sore loser, you know."

The Ever-King raised a dubious eyebrow, then smiled.

Yoko slid her sword from its scabbard, pointing it in the direction of the oncoming troops. Her kitsuryou galloped through the air, never slowing, bearing her straight into the swarm of knights that rose up from the castle.

Deep within the castle, past dozens of bristling battlements and hall after hall filled with fierce defenders, Yoko found what she sought: a tawny-gold beast sitting alone in a silent chamber.

A kirin.

Keiki?

The creature stared at Yoko with a gaze as deep and mysterious as the Void Sea. Quickly she walked to him, and he rubbed the tip of his nose against her arm. One of his slender legs, graceful as a deer's, was bound with a chain of iron.

"Keiki?"

The kirin looked into Yoko's eyes. She stroked his golden mane, and the large eyes closed.

My other half . . .

This beast—only a figment of some storyteller's imagination in the world where she was born—was the one who had brought her here, who had set her fate.

"I've been looking for you," Yoko said. She crouched down beside the beast and he rested his chin on her lap, dipping his head as though bowing. She stroked his mane again. There was a hard clinking noise as the kirin shifted his chained foot.

"Wait. I'll free you." She got to her feet. Drawing her sword, she faced the heavy chain; then, angling a blow at the centermost link, she brought down the blade with as much force as she could muster. With a ringing sound the chain was severed. The manacle sprang open and the kirin stepped free, moving with weightless grace. Then he bent his head toward Yoko again, nudging her arm with his horn.

"What is it?" Yoko asked, looking at the delicate single-pronged antler. She noticed that a section of it, a band about as wide as her palm, bore a strange pattern. It was the color of dried blood, tightly inscribed with iron-red letters.

"What's this?"

The kirin continued to rub its horn against her arm with something akin to impatience, and Yoko realized that something was amiss. The other magical beasts she had known here, including Rakushun and the spirit-beasts that had carried

her across the Void Sea, had all been capable of speech. If that was so, why then should this kirin, surely the greatest of all the spirit-beasts, be mute?

Then she remembered one of the visions her sword had shown her.

With its horn wrapped, the kirin can neither assume human form nor speak.

She laid her hand lightly upon the beast's horn, and he lowered his head permissively. She scrubbed hard at the pattern with the sleeve of her robe; the letters did not fade. When she squinted her eyes and looked more closely, she saw that tiny, delicate characters had been engraved into the material of the horn itself.

If it's a wound, this may help, Yoko thought, pulling the scabbard gem on its cord from inside her robe. She ran it lightly across the surface of the horn, and the characters noticeably dimmed. She made several more passes with the gem; each time the characters grew fainter, until at last they were invisible. Suddenly a voice sounded under her arm. "Many thanks."

The voice was familiar, yet it felt like an age had passed since Yoko had last heard it.

"Keiki?" she breathed.

The kirin narrowed his eyes and looked up at her. "Who else? It seems I've put you through a great deal of trouble, and for this I apologize." He didn't sound sorry in the least.

A smile came unbidden to Yoko's lips. Yes, it was the same old Keiki she knew, droll and unrepentant to the last.

"You came alone?" he demanded.

"The Ever-King aided me," she told him. "His kingsmen are outside now, dealing with the armies of the impostor who imprisoned you."

"I see," said the kirin, nodding; then he raised his voice. "Hyoki! Jusak'!"

The two spirit-beasts appeared immediately, sliding out of the surface of the wall. "Present," said the one called Jusak'.

"Go and aid the Ever-King," Keiki commanded.

The two creatures bowed deeply and disappeared in the same way that they had come.

"You're all right?" Yoko asked, after a moment.

"Of course," the kirin replied, his tone indicating that this was the most needless question she could have asked.

"When your horn is bound, you can't command your sirei?"

"You have learned much, it seems. Yes, it's as you have surmised." The kirin gave a distasteful grunt. "I apologize that I was not able to aid you."

"At least Joyu escaped binding," Yoko said. "Without his help, I wouldn't be here now. What about Kaiko and Hankyo?"

"They are with me. Shall I summon them?"

"No—as long as they're well."

The kirin nodded slowly.

"Oh, right," Yoko said suddenly, remembering. "I had a favor to ask."

"Name it."

"I want you to take back the command you gave Joyu, so he may talk with me. But leave him, er . . . *attached*, if you would," she hastily added.



The kirin looked at Yoko, and blinked several times. "You *have* changed."

"Yes, well," she replied. "I should thank you for the *hinman*. Joyu has saved my life several times. I *do* thank you. And . . . I wanted to ask you one other thing."

"What is it you wish of me?"

"I want to know how to write *Joyu*. What characters do you use for his name?"

The beast's eyes opened wide. "A surprising request."

"Is it? It's just, since everything in this world seems to have its proper characters, I feel that if I don't know what they are, I don't know something's true name."

When Yoko said this, she felt a tingling sensation move through her hand. Of its own accord, Yoko's index finger lifted and began to draw the characters in the air:

冗祐

Unnecessary aid . . . ?

Yoko laughed quietly. "I thank you too, then, Joyu," she said to the empty air, "though you're hardly unnecessary."

The sirei follow the kirin, and therefore the king, said a voice inside her head. *There is no need for thanks.*

Yoko smiled. The kirin stared at her, narrowing his eyes. "Truly, you have changed."

"Yes," Yoko replied. "I had a lot to learn."

"To be frank," Keiki told her, "I had not expected to see you again."

Yoko nodded slowly. "Nor I you. You . . . won't take human form?"

"And be seen naked before Your Majesty?" he replied, shocked.

Yoko laughed. "No, of course not." She shook her head. "Let's go home and get you something to wear. Though I think we'll be hangers-on at Shadowlore palace for a while yet, before we can return to Goldenwave."

She laughed again, and the kirin blinked again, then knelt and stretched out to lie at her feet. As he moved, a marvelous luminescence played along the fur of his back.

"By the mandate of Heaven, I serve you, my master," the creature said solemnly, lowering his head until his single antler touched Yoko's foot. "Never to abandon, always to obey, I swear my loyalty with this oath."

The Glory-King smiled. "I accept."



And so begins Yoko's story.

"Thus it is told that in the spring of the sixth year of Yosei, being the Era of the Blue Prophet, Keiki, minister of Kei, had lost the way, and calamity was visited upon the realm.

In Gyouten, great conflagrations raged, and pestilence scoured the populace. All governance was without order, and corruption and bribery grew rampant. Then the people despaired, and lamented in song, believing that the General of Heaven had come to destroy Kei.

It was during the waxing of the fifth moon of that year that the Glory-King known as the Prophet prostrated herself before the Mountain of the Sage's Brush and thereby abdicated her throne. The moon waxed still as she was ruined upon the mountain and buried thereafter in the Land of Cold Springs. Glory-King she had been for six years, the Prophet her death name for eternity.

The Prophet ruined, the impostor Joyei rose in her place. Claiming the title of Glory-King, she entered Gyouten, and chaos spread like wildfire through the realm; the people's miseries were redoubled.

And then, during the seventh moon of the seventh year, Yoko Sun-Child was chosen the next Glory-King of Kei: Yoko Sun-Child, of the surname Nakajima, and the true name of Sekishi, the Red Child, who had been born as Taika over the Void Sea. In the first moon of the seventh year she returned from the land of Hourai, and in the waning of the seventh moon, did bring succor to the land; and begging aid of Shoryu, Ever-King of En, she quelled the false king, Joyei.

In the eighth moon, upon the Mountain of the Sage's Brush, she received the Mandate of Heaven and became the Glory-King in truth, to be revered by her people and counted among the gods. In Gyouten, then, she gave final repose to the Prophet, and assigned the six officials and many governors of the land to bring order. The new calendar was named Sekiraku, being the start of the Era of Red Happiness, and so the Court of the Red King began."

—The Red Book of Kei

San Mateo
Public Library

ISBN 978-1-4278-0257-6

San Mateo Public Library
3 9047 07828597 6

TOKYOPOP®

THE TWELVE KINGDOMS™

More than just a fantasy story filled with horrific monsters, half-beasts, and magicians, *The Twelve Kingdoms* centers around a world reminiscent of Chinese mythology and rife with civil and political upheaval. *Sea of Shadow*, the first volume of this ongoing seven-volume epic, takes you on a wild ride that leaves you questioning the bounds of reality and fantasy.

"A political epic with dashes of romance and a compelling translation that sucks you into the story and won't let go."
-Newtype USA.

"Fuyumi Ono weaves a bewitching tale."
—yabookscentral.com

"This is a fantasy novel displaying a grand imagination and soaring adventure."
—ActiveAnime.com

ISBN 978-1-4278-0257-6
9 781427 802576 50899 6

POP FICTION

tokyopop.com/popfiction US $8.99 CAN $10.50 UK £5.99