

# Ditched

A Story from the Fall of the Onyx Empire  
following the Events and People of Winter Court V

By Jeanne Kalvar (AKA Kakita Kaori / Kakita Kyoumi WC5)

## Chapter 1

*I am not going to die here.*

*My name is Kakita Arahime and I am not going to die here.*

*I am a daughter of the line of Kashiwa and I am not going to die here*

*My line is the line of a hundred generations of Kenshinzen. A line of Empresses.*

*I descend from the blood of Yasurugi and Konoshiko. I descend from the blood of Kakita and the First Men. I descend from the blood of Doji-no-kami, daughter of Heaven.*

*I am not going to die here.*

*I will not abandon the daisho of Masarugi here. I will not abandon the blades of Kaori here.*

*I will not die in some hot, filthy jungle to be eaten alive by insects.*

*I am not going to let my mother and father mourn me.*

*I am not going to let Harun, that baka, ditch me without giving him a piece of my mind.*

*I am not going to die here.*

*I am not going to die...*

*I am not...*

*I am...*

-----

**Spring, 1236 - Shiro san Kakita**

The closing ceremony had been a slightly more subdued affair than it had been the year before. Most of the villagers had scattered. The glory of victory in the Topaz Championship had eluded the Crane, a disappointment. The Emerald Champion and his retinue had departed early; the war in Sparrow lands was going poorly, there were rumors of conflict in Otosan Uchi itself, and Kakita Karasu could not afford to be absent for long.

One by one, each participant in the tournament that had reached this point was called forward, received their daisho from a family member, and swore allegiance to the Clan Champion or appointed representative.

“Kakita Arahime. Step forward.”

She had been called second to last, the highest placing Crane in the Topaz Championship. She was met by her mother, dressed in her kimonos of white trimmed with blue and Imperial jade. She handed Arahime a daisho that seemed ancient. The saya was a beautiful pearl white, and the tsuba of the katana was gold with the image of a crane flying over a river scattered with cherry blossom.

“Your grandmother’s sword,” said Kyoumi, a soft smile curving her lips, and the young woman knew it was true. These were the blades of Kakita Kaori, a kenshinzen of unquestioned honor and the last kenshinzen of the direct line, her great grandmother. Arahime accepted with a bow and felt the weight of the responsibility of generations fall about her shoulders.

Arahime then went forward and knelt before the Crane Clan Champion, Doji Ayumu, offering her swords. “This one offers you, Doji-no-kimi, her oath of fealty, her life, and her sword to use as you see fit. This one wishes to serve you to the fullest extent of bushido and to follow you wherever you lead, as called Kakita Arahime.” She then bowed low.

Doji Ayumu accepted with a nod. “I accept your oath, Kakita Arahime, and the honor you will bring to the Clan of Doji.”

The new Topaz Champion, a Dragon, made his pledge to his own clan representative and all arose. Arahime turned to join her parents, but as she turned away, she was stopped by the sound of Lord Doji Ayumu's voice.

"Arahime-san. Kyoumi-san. Kousuda-san. Meet me this evening for tea when the celebration is finished. I wish to discuss your new assignment."

This was not something that could be refused.

The main gates to the village of Tsuma fell shut with a thud, and with that sound the Topaz Championship was, officially over and the celebrations had begun. Kakita Arahime watched them silently for a moment or two, willing them open again, but her baleful glare did nothing to move the gates or move the hearts of the gate guards who held them. She did not feel like celebrating.

"He didn't come."

Her mother laid a hand on the young woman's shoulder, her renowned voice speaking softly. "Events do not always happen as we want them to, Arahime-chan. It could have been anything. I am certain he wished he were here."

"If he wanted to, he would have made it." Arahime's words were more resentful than her heart truly felt. But they were flavored with disappointment and it left a bitter taste in her mouth. There could be only one Topaz Champion each year, and there was no dishonor in coming second. But she could not help but think that somehow, if Harun had kept his promise, she'd have been able to focus just a little bit harder, strike just that little bit more true, and have won the final match. It was not right for her to think so, but she felt it anyway.

She followed her mother in silence, ignoring the congratulations from the other students and visiting adults on her fine performance. *When I see that baka again, I'm going to give him a piece of my mind*, Arahime thought angrily.

*If he's alive.* He had no right to make her worry about him.

*If he cares about me.* He had no right to make her care about him. He had no right to make those fluttering feelings in her chest start whenever she thought about him.

*If he hasn't run away to join the Unicorn for good.*

*Stupid Baka.*

A very plain tea set was laid out on the low table. There might have been a time when such a set would be considered too plain for a daimyo's table, but the art had changed. This piece

was simple and beautiful. Doji Ayumu was already kneeling on the opposite side of the table when Kakita Arahime entered with her parents. It was clear from the arrangement of the room that this was to be a quiet and informal conversation, despite the Champion's high status. It was also clear that even the clan champion afforded Kyoumi and Kousuda a measure of respect.

They bowed to the Champion and took their places opposite him in silence while he poured the tea. The tea ceremony began in typical silence as each appreciated the subtle flavors of the tea. Arahime was confused, but did her best. Only once tea was poured and appreciated did Ayumu open the conversation.

"Do you like the tea? It was a gift from the Warlord in Second City. Our own tea plantations will take years to recover, but through our trade agreements with the Rinjin, we are able to have such small luxuries."

Kyoumi's eyes narrowed very slightly, but her smile was pleasant. "It is delicious. We are fortunate to have such trade agreements."

Kousuda took a second sip. "The choice is interesting. This variety seems particularly auspicious for the occasion."

Arahime was silent as the Champion nodded, pleased that his message had been sent. "Indeed. It was selected especially by our ambassador to the court of Second City. Doji Mushari is perhaps my finest ambassador, and has been for many years. Experienced. Intelligent. Able to speak several languages, and, more importantly, traverse the difficulties in understanding between us and the rinjin with grace of a dancer and the wit of a poet."

Kyoumi accepted the compliment silently, while her husband noted, "I have shared some correspondence."

Ayumu smiled. "Then I'm certain you have heard much from him about how well your wife's poetry and stories are received in the colonies. She has made quite the name for herself. It is no wonder, considering how instrumental she was to creating the very concept of rinjin. And you yourself had such favor from the Warlord! Of course, there are many troubles. Certain factions who are dissatisfied with the Imperial tax levies. The loss of his first yojimbo to tropical disease, and so on."

A frown graced the poet's lips. "I doubt any of the younger generations care much about the events of a winter court seventeen years ago, and I have much less time for poetry in my current role, Ayumu-sama." She had a wary tone in her voice, uncertain what the Champion was getting at, but beginning to feel like she would not like it. Arahime looked at her mother in confusion, a little wrinkle creasing her forehead.

The Doji lord acknowledged the frown. "It is still greater repute and respect than most any here in Crane lands." Finally, however, he chose to be more direct. "You may not have heard about Mushari's most recent difficulty. His yojimbo, Daidoji Yakune, recently was required

to commit seppuku. He was caught in an affair with a Yoritomo Courtier and it brought considerable dishonor. Now he is without his sword. Even though I have no concerns at all for Mushari's honor or safety, it is incumbent on me to be certain he has competent protection. Considering the respect the rinjin have for you and your family, and your family's vaunted reputation for diplomacy and skill, I believe Arahime will be the best I have for this role."

Her parents looked at Arahime with expressions of grave concern, and the girl felt an icy spike of fear go down her spine, but she composed her face and maintained her on. She answered soberly, "Of course, Ayumu-sama. I will go wherever you send me." *I don't have to like it. This is duty. I passed my gempukku, Mother. You can't protect me anymore.*

The Crane daimyo emptied his cup and set it down. He acknowledged Arahime with a respectful nod. "Spoken like a true samurai on her name day." He looked at Kyoumi and Kousuda. "She will have as much protection as I am able to give. Mushari is a good and honorable man and will do all he can to protect her too. I do not doubt that, were duels to come, the Kakita school will outstrip any the Yoritomo or Otomo can provide."

Kyoumi sighed and put down her own cup. The tea tasted like boiled leaves. "As you will, my lord. When does she depart?"

"Her ship leaves from Otosan Uchi in three days. Thank you all. This may not be the sweetest tea but I can think of few better to share it with."

The three bowed in acceptance, made their polite goodbyes and departed.

They did not have much time left together. They needed to take advantage of every moment.

Late in the evening, Arahime pulled out her brush and paper. She fiercely rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand to try to keep the tears from spilling and messing up the ink.

She'd waited half the night, hoping beyond hope that Harun would come in time. That she'd be able to see him before she had to leave. But he still wasn't here. She'd have to write him a letter and leave it with Kenshin-sensei.

---

*Dear Harun-san,*

*I am sorry I was not able to stay until you finally arrived. You missed a lovely time at the Topaz Championship. Of course, Mirumoto Fumaki claimed the prize, but everyone tells me that coming second is very respectable and brings great honor to the family. Mother tells me that there were several inquiries about marriage prospects already but it is early days yet. My only regret is that you were not there to cheer me on.*

---

*You should have been here, Harun...I don't want to marry someone else....they wouldn't have even approached Mother if you were here....*

---

*It rained during the tsu-fish hunt, but the boys I was teamed up with and I persevered. Remember when we used to go look for them? The chase was exciting, certainly. I am sure that you had many exciting adventures during your days in Unicorn Lands. I wish I could have heard all about them. Your father was also here, though he had to leave early. There was some trouble with the merchant ships in Ootosan Uchi he needed to attend to.*

---

*We made it through the rain...I did it without you. But with you it would have been better.*

---

*Unfortunately, right after the closing ceremonies, I received my new assignment, directly from Doji Ayumu-sama. The most recent yojimbo for the Crane Ambassador in Second City recently committed seppuku regarding an incident with a Yoritomo courtier. The ambassador, Doji Mushari, needs a new one. Since Mushari-sama is currently without protection, I am required to leave immediately. Ayumu-sama believes that my family's reputation and my father's connections will serve me well in this new posting.*

---

*My parents think this is really dangerous...Mushari has lost two yojimbo already. They're frightened. But I have to go....*

---

*I will miss you and write to you as often as I am able. Know that I will always think on you and remember fondly our times spent dancing in the gardens pretending that the world was kind.*

---

*I don't know if I will be able to write. I don't know what will happen. But...with you the world was perfect. I wish it could be that way again.*

---

*Sincerely,  
Kakita Arahime.*

---

She sealed up the note. She would take it to Kenshin-sensei first thing in the morning, before her family left for Ootosan Uchi.

## Chapter 2

### ***Spring, 1236 - The Coast off Ootosan Uchi***

The wind sent her white hair flying like a banner streaming behind Arahime as she watched Ootosan Uchi grow smaller and smaller in the distance. The weather was beautiful, the seas pristine, and her heart was far more turbulent than the waters.

The last three days had been a whirlwind. Her parents had used all their contacts and resources to swiftly prepare her for her trip. Her father had, somehow, managed to find a set of the light armor that the colonists favored, and had it shaped and freshly lacquered within two days. Her mother had had a seamstress prepare a new lightweight kimono of recent style, and also tucked in the beautiful, if scandalous, teal kimono she herself had been given by the old Mantis Clan Champion, Moshi Janisha, many years ago. The Emerald Champion himself had sent along a broach, and the Imperial Treasurer had provided a half a dozen letters of introduction to all those who owed him favors. She had a list of names and appearances and customs prepared for her to memorize.

And she knew all the preparation in the world would never be enough.

It was not the call of adventure that frightened her. Her father told stories of the Burning Sands, the exotic djinn and giant roc, of sorcerers and oases and magic carpets. She remembered hanging off of his every word, trying to imagine a world so far away. Her mother always watched the storytelling with a wistful smile, usually while she herself was buried in the depths of her own studies, either of the dark ways of Jigoku, or in the dance of letters and the court where she turned the priorities of the Voice, Hida Kozen, into action. Sometimes Harun had been there, also hanging off of Kousuda's every word, though he worked harder to hide his interest.

He was always better at hiding how he felt.

*Too much Fire and Air*, That's what her masters had told her. They tried to lead her to the paths of Void, of Earth, and Water, to the deep places in herself where she could find peace and center. To not allow her emotions to master her. And she had tried. But it was a struggle. How would she find patience and stillness in the heat of Zoegeku?

While she imagined the adventure, though, the truth was Arahime had never been far from her home. Though her parents had been away in Ootosan Uchi while she was at the Academy, the Academy was just like home to her. She knew every rock and tree. In the colonies, even the trees themselves would be strange to her. That made her nervous, but that was not her greatest fear.

Her greatest source of fear was that, as young and as green as she was, she was to be entrusted with the life of the finest ambassador of the Crane? She had never been given much responsibility for anything. Too much fire and air, just as her Sensei had said. Too many convoluted thoughts and wild imaginings. Not enough faith.

Now she travelled to the end of the world, alone.

She took a deep breath of the familiarly salt-scented air. She closed her eyes and listened to the sound of wheeling seagulls.

She had a long journey before her. Perhaps she could push the thoughts of Harun, of her parents, of her home aside to focus on the moment.

Perhaps she could find her center out there on the ocean.

Perhaps the moment would be enough to carry her through.

### ***Late Spring, 1236 - The Ivory Kingdom Coastline***

Arahime had never seen so much green.

In the halls of the Kakita Academy, there were pictures painted by the famous Grandmaster Painter, Kakita Toshiki, that showed the Kitsune Mori before the devastation the Crab had wrought upon it. Her mother had drawn pictures in the air of the deep forests of the Isawa Mori with its many dark pines and ancient pathways. Neither were anything like the coastline that rapidly approached.

The trees did not come in one height, but were layered with tiers that went up towards heaven like the roofs of a pagoda. A thin strip of pearl-white beach fronted rows of trees with long, thin trunks with no branches like bamboo, their leaves a brush at the top that shaded the ground. Every so often, she could catch a glimpse of a flash of bright red or blue, the wings of some brilliantly colored bird.

It had been a long trip, and Arahime was more at peace with it than she had been when she had left. She was still not happy with leaving so fast, but the prospect of new faces and new lands were intriguing. *Harun would have liked it...* She crushed the thought quickly. Those thoughts were for a different time and a different land and she could not afford the sin of regret. She told herself she was



going to enjoy every single moment this strange world had to offer her, and do the very best she could to serve the ambassador and her clan with excellence. And maybe see something beautiful along the way.

“Beautiful and deadly.”

Arahime turned. One of the Mantis sailors on the ship nodded his head at the jungle while he tightened a rope that held the sail.

“The Ruined Kingdom. The jungles. There’s colors there you’ve never seen before, Kakita-sama. Ruins bigger than anything you’d believe. But creatures the size of any oni that hauled itself out of Kanpeki’s black butthole. Insects with poison as vile as a scorpions, and ants that would eat a bushi under his own armor. Those that go in those jungles don’t come out. No, I wouldn’t go ashore there...but from here? Beautiful.”

Arahime ignored the coarse language and nodded her understanding and appreciation of the warning. She had no intention of trying to leave the city anyway; her charge was unlikely to go adventuring in the jungle at his age anyway.

As the ship approached the mouth of the river, small fishing villages began to dot the banks. They looked very similar to the villages near Ootosan Uchi she had ridden to with her parents as a little girl. She remembered joining with the village children, learning to swim and play in the waves, as some of her earliest memories.

The great stone archways and palaces, crumbling in places, looked ancient...as ancient as the oldest parts of the crumbling city of Ootosan Uchi, but in a way that was completely alien to her. Each giant block of moss and ivy-covered stone crept slowly past as the ship made its slow and stately progress upstream.

The land grew more densely inhabited the further upstream they went. Villages carved and standing on the ruins of Ivory Kingdom fortresses, then small towns built inside the shells of great palaces, then larger cities built around intact buildings. Finally, the banners and ships and grandiosity of a mighty port, and a spread of farmlands that seemed very much the tranquil domesticity of her home. Beyond the port and these lands lay the capital of these lands of the Rinjin. Home of the Warlord, and favored of the Thunder Dragon. Second City.

### ***Late Spring, 1236 - Second City***

The whirlwind of disembarking, the strange sights and sounds, it was all Arahime could do to keep from gawking as she followed the servant that had been sent to bring her to the Crane Ambassador. The road from the docks was greater than she imagined; there had been much recent building there. Beyond the stalls and houses that lined the road, the samurai-ko could see more of the farmland she had seen as she approached by river. She was led past low walls and through an area of merchants and artisans, their booths and stalls crowded together worse than the merchants that gathered around Tsume village for market day. Beyond the peasant and merchant districts, huge Kaiu-built

walls surrounded the military district within, though the heimen refused to tell her the area's real name when she pressed with her questions. Here, the buildings began to go up and up in height, reaching towards the heavens. The feeling was oppressive, as though they were all going to come tumbling in on her. However, there were areas more grim in Otosan Uchi, so she marched on, chin up, towards the inner wall that shielded the Inner District. Here, finally, the buildings of oppressive height at least had space between them for gardens and clear-running little streams. The servant led her up the steps to one of the smaller buildings in the district, well-appointed and marked by the statues that stood by its entrance as the new Embassy of the Crane. She was ushered inside to meet her new charge.

She instantly liked him. Doji Mushari was an older man, with white hair done up neatly in a traditional courtier's cap, deeply tanned skin, and tired brown eyes. His face had a number of sun-worn spots and wrinkles furrowed his brow, but they served to bring animation and a gentle smile to his face as he invited Arahime to join him.

"My dear young woman," he said, giving her a bow that honored her with an equal status. "I am so grateful that you are here. I met your father, years ago, when he came to discuss the paths of treating with gaijin used among the Ide. Kousuda-san was most inspirational, and I have had reason to call on his insights many times since I arrived at this post. I trust your journey was not too unpleasant."

Arahime shook her head. "It was not. I'm told there are storms later in the summer, but the convoy left before late spring and we only had a few short bursts of wet weather.

"Excellent. I have not read the letters yet, but I look forward to the reports. Not all things are for the Morishita to read. I am certain I will learn more about you in the reports, and I have prepared one for you, about myself, about our situation, and everything I hope you will need. I know it is very difficult to adjust so quickly to a new situation, and you are fresh from your gempukku. I will do everything I can to make the transition smooth for you."

"Thank you, Mushari-sama. I will do my best to serve," Arahime answered.

Mushari poured a cup of some cool juice for Arahime and passed it to her and invited her to sit with him before a table set with a variety of kinds of foods, many of which were unfamiliar to her. After she was settled and comfortable, his tone grew less formal, but more grave. He sighed.

"Arahime-san. It is a difficult situation we are in here. The Warlord supports our endeavors. A few of the older families. It has taken much work, but relations are finally...comfortable...with the Morishita family and the Tenmei family. They are less good with the Nobumoto and poor with the Arashi and the Ota. Always we have striven to work with each family as fairly as possible, open to change and adaption, while still maintaining the structure that is needed for others to understand the depths of our sincerity. The older generation, the ones that remember being something other than Rinjin, who remember being samurai, understand still what was lost and what was gained as they become what they become."

The older man offered her a bite of some small, round fruit. Its sweetness burst on her tongue, delicious after the long sea voyage. She savored the taste as he continued.

“When the founders of these families returned to this kingdom, many winters ago, before you were born, they carried with them the gift of the Emperor’s independence. It was a gift they sought eagerly. When the Onyx Empire sundered these lands from the Empire, the colonists that had been here felt abandoned and rejected. In the long break of contact between the Empire and Zoegeku, they had no advocate in the ways of the culture of the Empire. And, with our own hands bound, and the Empire so distant, we were not able to teach them as we should. Perhaps it, too, is a place where the Crane have failed, as we have in so many ways in the face of these battles.”

“But we couldn’t...!” Arahime leapt to the defense of her clan, but Mushari raised his hand to stop her. “No, Arahime-san. You will need to bear much more than simple words of honest reflection. You will have to bear insult to you. To our clan. Each clan has done wrong and right over the years. The times have been hard, and all of us have struggled, won, and sometimes failed in our duties over the years. But failure has its cost. Especially when combined with the anger of those who are quick to blame others for their own sufferings. You will hear every sort of calumny spoken about the Children of Doji here.”

Arahime closed her mouth tightly and tried to listen as Mushari continued. “Those founders of the Great Houses were eager to explore what their independence was, to make something new. We could not provide a culture for them, so they created their own. They raised up the lost past of these lands, drawing on the customs and culture and the resources of the Ivinda who had gone before, rather than taming their hearts into the ways of the samurai of Rokugan. Once independence was granted, they rejoiced in their newfound uniqueness. They enjoyed the goods of the Empire, but they had no desire to re-embrace its ways.”

The young samurai-ko listened carefully, suppressing her questions. She took a sip of the pale white liquid that Mushari had poured for her and focused on maintaining her face as he went on.

“This older generation has no love for the Onyx, and tells stories of the lands of Rokugan and what was lost. They do appreciate the gift the Emperor gave to them and the debts they owe, and only rarely speak of them with resentment. But their children...for them it is a different matter. The Empire is very distant to them. The monsters the Great Clans fight, almost a myth. The Emperor is a foreign power that strips away their wealth and their resources fighting a foe that for these young ones barely exists. These young people are children of the world their parents wished to create, and that world has little space for the ancient ways.”

He lowered his eyes to his cup, and there was surprising compassion in his tone. “It is not fair to say there is no suffering here. Each year the monsoons crash down upon them. Creatures emerge from the jungles to extract their price, and diseases can be swift and deadly. But in good years and bad, the Crane collect the debts. We need this repayment, for our treasuries are stripped empty and every koku we have goes to fund the war and feed the people, but here they do not understand. Every year, some of their heimen leave to return to our lands, for we have recruiters among them who arrange passage for any who wish to go. The Ivinda population grows. For these many troubles, it is...convenient...for many to blame the Crane. Their wrath at the Crab and Lion may be greater, but they are not here. We are.”

The Kakita could hear in his tone much of the way her father spoke as he tried to help her resolve her differences with her younger brother, Masarugi, or when he would come to visit the academy and she'd complain to him of the troubles Harun was facing. The boys who teased him used to make her so angry! But her father would try to explain what it was to be frightened of change, and how Harun, how he, himself, who was once Ide, was a great change to many in his new family, and change took time. Mushari too seemed to at least try to understand those who hated him. How could the daughter of Kakita Kousuda do less?

She bowed to the Doji. "I will try to understand and keep my patience, Doji-sama. I do get angry sometimes, but I will try."

The Crane ambassador returned her bow. "And you will succeed," he said plainly. "You must. Without a yojimbo, I must tread even more carefully. You are my only worthy champion, and a duel stands, here as in Rokugan, as the final test of truth when persuasion and diplomacy have failed. Without my faithful guard, I am forced into ever weaker stances. I have not been able to bring in more artisans or courtiers to help them learn the ways of the Empire or to temper this hot court, because I cannot provide them safety. I cannot challenge falsehoods made against us. I cannot afford to lose you, Arahime-san. But we cannot start any unnecessary duels or trouble. The Crane still need this vital link of trade, and we cannot make our relations with the houses that favor us worse. " He drained his cup and set it down to give her a grandfatherly smile. "It is a heavy burden I place on your shoulders, Kakita Arahime-san. But I know the strength of your family. I know you will survive the trials of this place, and excel. However difficult they might be."

As Kakita Arahime stared at the ceiling in her chamber that night, feeling the floor sway beneath with the remaining vertigo of her sea-voyage, she certainly hoped the old Doji was right.

## Chapter 3

### ***Late Spring, 1236 - Second City***

The old Doji had done what he could. In the way of the Doji, he considered it his duty to look after every tiny detail. Her room was comfortable and serene. He had already had prepared for her clothing in exactly the correct current fashion for yojimbo in the court, though he had noted that her armor was perfectly appropriate. But it was hard to keep her face correctly impassive as she followed him into the colonnaded courtyard that served as the Warlord's palace. She felt like she was walking out onto a battlefield naked.

She immediately drew eyes from throughout the court. Mushari was old, a familiar face. They were used to seeing his white hair and blue eyes. But Arahime's pale skin, long, ivory locks, and stormy gray eyes, stood out in a stark contrast amidst these darker faces. It had been several years since a Crane maiden, especially one of the kuge, had appeared in these halls. Perhaps it was the shortness of her kimono, but Arahime could feel hungry eyes upon her.

Mushari led her to a man, around her mother's age, with green eyes and his red hair streaked with white from an early age. He bowed to him, and then made a gesture towards her. She bowed also, more deeply.

"Morishita-sama, please allow me to introduce my new yojimbo, Kakita Arahime. She has just arrived on the Cormorant from Ootosan Uchi" He turned slightly to face Arahime. "Arahime-san, I am privileged to introduce you to the head of the Great House Morishita."

Arahime's quick mind raced over the notes that her mother had prepared for her and that she had memorized as she bowed again. *Used to be Kitsune. Shugenja. Testy. Has Red Panda spirit. A few other things.* "Morishita-sama," she offered as smoothly as she was able. "It is an honor to meet such a renowned Restorer-of-the-Lands. How are the efforts here in these lands going?"

The Shugenja cocked his head thoughtfully, looking the girl up and down. "Well," he offered Mushari. "She's more polite than the last one. That is something, I suppose." He turned to address Arahime directly. "We've reclaimed about as much of the jungle as we can, barring help from the Emperor, which we're not going to get. Naturally. But it is polite of you to ask." He rubbed the short beard he wore. "You look familiar to me. Do you have family from the Colonies?"

Arahime darted an uncertain glance towards Mushari, who stepped in smoothly. "She is the daughter to a Crane poet. Kakita Kyoumi. I believe she wrote a sequence of stories that was quite popular here about six years ago called the 'Journey of the Woodpecker?' Delightful tales."

Lord Morishita acknowledged the name, but Arahime could not help but think the man's smile looked rather awkward. "Well, we shall see if your new yojimbo can outstrip her predecessors in honor, Mushari-san." He gave a small bow to both and departed.

Mushari watched him go thoughtfully.

There were other introductions, a whirlwind. Some of the names she had memorized previously, some she had not but did her best. All were older men and women, similar in age to Mushari. The last introduction, made towards the end of the day, was the Warlord himself.

The scrolls Arahime had studied had described the Warlord's heritage, part Ivinda, part Moshi from the days before the colonies had received their independence, part son of Yoritomo, born from the Scorpion, adopted child of the Son of Storms. He was a slender, tall man, with dark, dark skin, even darker than Harun's, with long gray hair and odd, gaijin eyes that evaluated her like the Master Gardener would take the measure of a new tree taking root in his garden. Like a man trying to decide if this tree should be uprooted or

fostered. She bent knee properly, keeping in perfect alignment with her charge, though adjusting for her lower station.

The Warlord's expression was cool. "Welcome to Second City. I hope you have the chance to enjoy all that we have to offer."

The words were neutral, but it sounded like an instruction. "I look forward to it, Arashi-sama." *Equally neutral, but eager to please. That should work.*

The Warlord then made a gesture, and a much younger man, much the same in appearance as the Warlord, stepped forward. He was only a year or two older than Arahime herself. He too had long black hair in a flowing tail and dark, dark skin, though his eyes were not as wide and gaijin. She could feel those eyes running over her. He was wearing a loose-fitting kimono of teal silk that showed off his muscular chest. The younger man bowed politely. "Allow me to introduce my only grandson, Seiho-kun," the Warlord offered.

Arahime bowed back towards the younger man. Once again, she felt very self-conscious as the eyes of the court turned upon her, and could draw no sense of intent from the Warlord's beast-eyes. "I am honored to meet you, Seiho-sama."

The Warlord's grandson smiled, his white teeth flashing. "I find myself jealous of old Mushari-san, that he may spend so much time basking in this radiance. I hope he would not object if I pluck a few small moments of your time to introduce you to the wonders of Second City." His voice was smooth and charming and altogether too forward.

Arahime felt an instinctive pang of immediate loathing which she managed to keep from her face. *This may not be in my duties, but I must not be rude. Maybe a polite refusal?* "Surely you would be too busy to act as guide for a simple yojimbo such as me."

"Is that not the lesson of the Crane that time spent in the presence of great beauty is never wasted?" Seiho seemed pleased with his cleverness in the response.

*Oh no. He's taking it as a gift. Now there was no getting out of it.* Arahime tried to keep her voice neutral as she answered, "There is such great beauty in these lands already, bright colors and vivid sights. I am plain and pale in comparison."

"Ah, but half the beauty of these flowers are in their exotic nature, and here, you are a rare bloom. I would be honored to be seen in the presence of such a rarity."

Arahime's bow helped her conceal her frustration. The Arashi was greater rank than her; she had little choice anyway. "I would be happy to see these exotic sights then, if Mushari-sama finds opportunity to grant me leave, Seiho-sama."

She could hear the faint sound of tittering from behind her, where a number of the other younger courtiers stood with their fans raised. On being dismissed, she straightened and turned, but the laughter stopped as she turned to face them. But she could feel the eyes of

many upon her. Evaluating her, judging her, weighing her as an ally, obstacle or threat.

On the way out of the door, she and the ambassador were intercepted by one of the young women of the court, wearing the mons of the Ota family.

“Oh, Mushari-sama, please let us welcome your new yojimbo,” the courtier said. “It looks like she will be so popular....and terribly...exotic. I am sure many of the young men of the court cannot wait to enjoy some time in her presence. And the rest of us cannot wait to find out how closely she resembles all we have heard of the legendary beauties of the Crane.”

The woman’s words were perfectly effusive and polite, but her inferences hit Arahime like a blow. *How dare they?* But Ambassador Mushari just nodded and smiled without responding, leading Arahime away while she focused on maintaining her On.

More eyes followed her on the way out. She straightened her back and tilted her chin up. *Ignore them. Focus on your duty, Arahime. Serve.*

## Chapter 4

### ***Early Summer, 1236 - Second City***

Summer court was fast approaching, and already the days were looking to become a long, hot misery. Mushari had warned her, had done everything he could to assist. He had taken her ‘calling’ on his friends throughout the high houses in the city. He slowly introduced her to new foods such as lentils and mangoes, discussing each and helping tame her reactions. He warned her of the heat, and gave her hints on how to keep her composure in such wilting temperatures.

But some things he could do nothing about. He could not change the way many of the other samurai of Second City smelled. He assured her it was simply because they lacked soy and therefore consumed more red meat, garlic, and cumin in their foods than the samurai of the Crane Clan. But the stench of grease and death was pervasive about them, and it was an exercise in discipline and courtesy to keep all trace of it from her features. She was rather proud of her ability to hide it.

The other thing he could not change was the way the young men looked at her. The shorter, lightweight kimono that seemed to reveal the lines of her body far too immodestly, the deep cut neckline, these were bad enough. But they were shared by all in the court. It wasn’t until Arahime finally could no longer avoid Seiho and his offer to escort her into the city that she found out why.

The streets of the city were crowded and the heat was oppressive even in the early evening. The Military District, hardened stone and tall buildings made an impressive wall around the central Imperial area. Seiho led Arahime and a half-dozen 'friends' and hangers-on through the Imperial District. He pointed out the various buildings, describing to her the history of city. Here where the ruins of Fuan-ti's tower had been before the deadly monsoon season of 1213, there the Great Baths. The young man had an unending supply of gossip, much of it salacious, and was eager to share it. There were several in her own clan back at the Academy who indulged in such, though Arahime's mother always warned her that, for gossip, it is best to hear and never listen. Little truths are rarely found there. Arahime merely nodded along politely.

The Military District was cramped and oppressive, ornamented primarily with colorful banners. Arahime could see that having the bushi of many clans in such a small area could swiftly lead to fights. On the other hand, there was much to encourage the sharing of different fighting styles. In one tight courtyard, the duelist watched as a Crab bushi instructed a group of rinjin in a technique performed with polearm with a U shaped hook at the end.

Arahime had grown up sheltered, perhaps, but every year the students of the Kakita Academy came to watch the melee and dueling in the Topaz Championship, and every other contest that the Crane could arrange. After each event, the students were tested extensively on their observations of the fighting styles of all the clans present, and Arahime had been a quick study on the subject. She could see traces of the styles of other clans, especially of Spider and Mantis, but the styles were rapidly merging towards something new. Something that drew from all of them. Perhaps determining what that was, and countering it, would be a distraction during the heat of Summer Court.

Seiho saw her interest and smiled. "Perhaps we will spar later, you and I? I have long heard of the artistry of the Kakita techniques. Of course, here we must be plain. Brutal even. We actually fight, you see. But do not worry...if we spar, I will be careful not to damage such loveliness."

A chorus of titters from behind them as some of Seiho's companions found the comment humorous. One of the Arashi's companions, a lean, muscular man a few years older than him, gave a low chuckle. "So, Seiho-sama. I heard the Crane have a word for the second strike in a fight." He paused dramatically for a moment, and continued in a fake, high-pitched voice, "***Please don't hit me again!***" I wonder if that is true."

Seiho shot his companion a glare. "Parushi-san. You should apologize. That was rude of you to say to our lovely guest from the Crane."

Arahime's hand drifted down to the comfortable weight of her blade in her saya as she struggled to keep her face composed. Her gray eyes glittered, but she held her tongue.

The man known as Parushi bowed deeply to Arahime. "My apologies, Kakita-san. I am but a



simple rinjin. I could not possibly know any better.”

The Crane kept her eyes fixed ahead of her, pushing down her anger and ignoring both him and his apology.

Arashi Seiho smiled. “Our ways here are surely less refined than you are used to. Thank you for being so forgiving, Arahime-san.” He led the way on towards the Temple district.

Arahime silently fumed.

The Temple District, in many ways, resembled her mother’s home in Otosan Uchi. The streets here, as everywhere else in the city, were crowded, but it smelled less badly than other areas of the city due to the heavy fragrance of incense in the air. Considerable damage had been done to this district recently, and large buildings had become nothing but piles of broken stone. Narrow roads were cut through the rubble as passage through the district.

Lining every road that had been cut between the blocks of stone, there were shrines. Some were very minimalist, a pile of stacked rocks and nothing more. Some clearly honored Fortunes that Arahime knew from Otosan Uchi or Kuyden Kakita. But many had statues that she did not recognize. In Rokugan, shrines would be decorated with a small arrangement of blossoms, a small bowl with a rice ball, or strips of red paper and incense. Here, all were decorated with brightly colored wreaths of paper flowers, great bowls of tropical fruit, and cards and tokens in every color, in gold and silver beside. Each shrine seemed to shout for more attention than the next. Both the round-eyed Ivinda and Rokugani tended the shrines around them.

As they walked, Seiho explained that six years before, a shugenja explorer had ventured westward into the lost cities in search of sacred artifacts, either for himself or for some more noble purpose. He found an artifact, a simple, smooth brown stone with some sort of light within. The shugenja brought it back to the Temple District and there tried to break it open. In so doing, he triggered an earthquake that destroyed most of the district and killed dozens. Since then, independent exploration had stopped. The Warlord permitted no more expeditions into the western jungles. Future development was occurring only in the east, where there were fewer threats and less risk of unleashing some hidden horrors. The search for artifacts of the Ivinda had ended. Arahime found that position perfectly reasonable, considering the extent of the damage.

Seiho was eager for her to see the remaining districts with him. Despite his condescension about her fighting prowess, the Arashi seemed to be working hard at being charming and genteel. But the space between Arahime’s shoulder blades continued to itch when she was

around him. She fought to repress her irritation. *You're just upset about Harun still, girl. You need to put that aside. Harun has every right to make a life of his own; you don't need to hang on him like an moon-addled doe. You must accept this moment as the Fortunes will it to be.*

But the itch between her shoulder blades didn't go away.

The next day, Arahime found herself again touring the city with Arashi Seiho in the last few hot evenings before Summer Court. She noticed that his friend Parushi was no longer present. But Seiho's retinue only grew, and she found herself the center of attention amongst fifteen young men and women, lesser stars circling the court of Second City's moon.

And with them, their 'compliments'.

"We are glad you could join us...we were concerned that you exhausted yourself last time," one, a rugged type who might have been a Crab twenty years ago, but now with the name Arashi Huriko, offered.

Arahime's eyes narrowed slightly. *I can play this game if I must. They're children.* "Oh, Huriko-san. If you found yesterday exhausting, you should have said something. We could have stopped earlier."

Another...a Tenmei, smiled warmly at her while fanning herself. "That kimono is just lovely. I'm certain my grandmother would have approved of it..."

Arahime wished she had a fan but retorted sharply, "Your grandmother must be a woman of great talent and dignity, bringing honor to her family. It is for us to endeavor to do the same."

Seiho smiled, and touching her elbow to lead her away from the group. She flinched at the unexpected and uninvited touch. "They are just jealous, Kakita-san," the Arashi offered with smooth flattery, pretending to ignore what he had done. "We should leave if we are going to be able to see an offering in the Artisan District this evening."

The Merchant District had less stone than the Military District, perhaps a little less oppressive without the tall buildings leaning over the streets. But it was far more noisy, crowded, and full of life and color. The older sensei had told her of the days before the war, when the streets around Tsuma village were crowded with merchants eager to sell their

wares. The years before the rationing and the travel restrictions and the gaijin pepper. During her own Topaz Championship, there were a full seven merchants in the busy village, including one from the Unicorn lands who brought a few, very restricted and approved, gaijin goods to offer. The throng of merchants of every land and language was overwhelming, the list of goods they offered at least equally so.

Arahime could not permit Seiho or his retinue to see her wide-eyed naiveté.

The merchants of the district carried a wide range of goods, and at least a third of which look nothing like the items she would find in Rokugan. Intricately carved wooden screens and pierced brasswork were offered side by side with fine pottery and wall scrolls fit for any Rokugani kamidana shrine. There was a style of carved stonework that she liked in a pale cream and green stone, and Arahime picked up a piece, an intricately nested set of spheres one inside the other. As she looked down she felt a presence behind her, felt the pressure of a man standing so closely at her back she could feel him leaning against her. She was trapped against the table. Seiho reached around her and took the stone sphere away, leaning in close, then straightening to look at the choice approvingly. "Shall I buy it for you? I can tell you want it."

*At the Academy, I would duel him for that. But at the Academy, he would not /dare/.* Arahime sidestepped to get out of his reach and straightened to look at him coldly. "Please stop," she said simply.

But Seiho just smiled and tossed the sphere from one hand to the other with casual ease. "Stop what? Is something the matter, Arahime-san? If so, I apologize. The ways of the rinjin are different than the ways of Rokugan, especially the ways of the cultured Crane. We never know when we might accidentally hold our teacups incorrectly or forget to fasten our geta 'just so'."

One of his hangers-on, a sharp-eyed Nobumoto girl, laughed aloud. "She is blushing. Do you see? She actually turned pink. Seiho-sama...how fortunate you are. Look at that beautiful, pale complexion. Such a treasure. How boring we must all look in comparison."

*I cannot call a duel here. Not for this.* She exhaled slowly out her nose. "Such...closeness...is not the way of the Crane, Seiho-sama." she answered stiffly.

Seiho's smile broadened. "Another reason to love Zogeku, then."

They reached the Artisan's District just after sunset. Brightly colored lanterns hung across the streets, and in front of the geisha houses and theaters. The lights gave the whole area the

feeling of a festival, like New Years when the dancers would stage their performances at the Academy and all would turn out to see them. Despite her previous fury, Arahime allowed herself a little seed of excitement at the idea of seeing a play. It was a common occurrence at her home, and the timeless stories, great heroes and villains, songs of tragedy and courage and sacrifice all spoke to her. Their plots had been the background of her childhood, even though her mother said she never watched the plays themselves.

The buildings in the Artisans' District were of better construction and finer make than those of the Merchants' district, as though they were built to weather the storms of time better than the Merchant District counterparts. Some of the buildings had shops; Arahime was drawn to a humble-looking shop named the Flowers of the Colonies, its beautiful, exotic ikebana modestly displayed.

"So...ikebana." A yawn from another of the Arashi-<sup>ら</sup>. "I've heard how much the Crane care for such things. You must be an expert. You must teach me all about it some time."

"I'll have to see if I can find the time," the Crane snapped back tartly.

The theater Seiho sought out was decorated in a very non-Rokgani fashion, built of solid stone, the stonework itself painted in many bright colors. A number of people were entering, and Arahime caught odd expressions being thrown her way as they passed. Seiho, for his part, seemed confident and pleased, again, with a light touch, taking her arm and steering her into the darkened building. The others gathered around, making sure to leave the young woman space to sit only next to the grandson of the Warlord. She sat.

The lanterns on the stage were lit, the music of many instruments began, and the play started.

---

*The form of a tall woman, pale with dramatic geisha-style kabuki paint, and adorned with a carefully styled wig of white hair, stepped out onto the stage. She was dressed in multiple layers of blue kimono and exotic hair ornaments. Blue scarves fluttered at the movement of unseen stagehands as she dramatically cried out to the Wrathful aspect of Suitengu, Fortune of the Oceans, that she must be conveyed across the seas to go to her Mantis lover or she would die of sorrow.*

*Another, dressed as the great Ocean Fortune in a costume of black, blue, and green with a coral crown, came out to answer her, telling her she would be taken to her Mantis lover if she did what she was bid by the three guardians of the sea that came to her.*

---

---

*The woman agreed.*

---

Arahime looked away from the stage to see Seiho watching her. When he caught her eye he smiled and turned back to the stage, but Arahime could feel his hand slide closer to her. She stiffened.

---

*An actor dressed as a shark emerged from the hinted waves, his shiny armor of scales glittering in the lantern light. The Shark spirit demanded that the woman release her hair and her hairpins and give them to him. The woman did so, letting her long, white hair down to flow around her.*

---

Arahime could not help her thoughts from straying to the time she had to put her hair up, when the Emperor brought his son Kiseki to join the Academy, the same year as her brother Masarugi. All the girls were supposed to look extra special for the Emperor, so all had their hair done. Harun had laughed at the lacquer necessary to hold the hair in place and how terrible it looked when the pins were removed until it was cleaned properly.

She smiled at the memory. But then she felt a warmth at her side as Seiho had drawn closer to her, sitting right next to her in the crowded theater, his arm behind her. She pulled away as she could, but he just smirked.

---

*An actor dressed as an Eel, wearing a smooth, shiny black silk kimono with jet hair, came from the waters. He demanded that the woman remove her kimonos as his price for taking her to her lover. He grabbed at her obi, taking the end of the obi in his teeth.*

---

Arahime knew full well what that action in kabuki meant. She felt sick at what the convention implied. But looking around the theater, it was clear that the audience did not, instead simply enjoying the lurid and horrifying spectacle with no understanding of its significance.

---

*The drums pounded out the music of tragedy as the woman shed the first layers of her kimono, leaving only the sheerest scarlet underkimono, trimmed with blue. It barely reached her knees.*

---

Arahime could feel every eye in the theater turning at that moment to look at her intently, eager to see her response. *How could I explain what this means...what they are showing? They can't possibly understand this.* She hardened her face against it, keeping a neutral expression.

Seiho slithered nearer.

---

*The Eel receded into the blue waters, and the final guardian emerged from the depth. This guardian was not played by one actor, but two, both dressed in red, moving together. Guardian Octopus. The actor of the two that served as the Guardian's voice declared that the woman's lover was dead, lost at the bottom of the endless sea, and the will of the Octopus was to take her to him. The Octopus wrapped its arms around the woman and disappeared, taking her deep beneath the waves.*

---

The theater erupted in cheers and applause. Arahime felt Seiho's hand on her back. As she turned to look at him, pulling away again, he smiled broadly.

"What do you think, Arahime-chan? A fine performance, is it not?"

The question seemed innocent. But there was a coldness, a calculation, in the Arashi's eyes as he looked at her.

*He knows what it meant. He knows. He just doesn't care.*

## Chapter 5

### **Summer Court, 1236 - Second City**

During the long, hot nights of Summer Court, Arahime focused on one goal and one goal only: avoiding Seiho, the Warlord's grandson. It was not expected that she remain in her armor throughout the days of the court; she wore it anyway. Mushari did not require a yojimbo's presence for every single meeting or walk across the Palace grounds; she walked with him anyway, hand resting on her obi. The old diplomat accepted the close guardianship of his young yojimbo with gentle patience, even though she did not speak with him of her troubles. The duelist held his papers, carried his gifts, and set up the braziers he would use to make tea. During the hot middays, Mushari returned to the Crane embassy. Arahime was able to sleep, study, or play go with the pleasant old man. He enjoyed telling stories of the Colonies and the things he had learned since he arrived here, and invited her to read to him when his eyes pained him. Arahime came to appreciate the quiet.

After a long evening spent watching the Doji meet irascible Ota and hot-tempered Nobumoto with equal amounts of calm pleasantries and unrelenting determination, Arahime had to ask him how he did it. Mushari smiled gently and poured her a cup of cool, sweet water of the coconut, flavored with matcha.

“My parents were courtiers of the Doji. Famous. Honored. Very well versed in the arts of diplomacy from the beginning of my family line. But when I was born, during the peaceful reign of the Empress Iweko, I had a great difficulty. For the fortunes saw fit to laugh at my family’s excess by afflicting me,” he expressed his mild amusement, “with a stutter.”

Arahime blinked, having never heard the courtier speak less than flawlessly.

He smiled as he continued. “This, of course, earned me much mockery. But my father was a wise and kind man, and he taught me well. You know the five lessons of Lady Doji?”

Arahime nodded. All those trained in a Crane dojo are taught about the five lessons, though as a bushi she was not necessarily expected to practice them all.

---

*Calligraphy: Your words are important and valuable. Once committed, they can never be taken back.*

*Ikebana: All things that are can be seen from many different perspectives and are transient. Significance depends on where the viewer stands at the moment it is viewed.*

*Painting: What you perceive is filtered and colored by your own moment and understanding; you must broaden your understanding to perceive what is timeless and essential.*

*Poetry: Words may have many meanings. One must look to the heart to know what is true.*

*Origami: To reach a desired end requires patience and the completion of many small steps done with excellence.*

---

Mushari smiled. “It is good the lessons have not been lost, even when so much else has. My father was determined and persistent. Every day he worked with me to improve my speech. It took many years. I suppose it is a benefit that, shielded from the world as we were for many of the dark years of the war, I benefited greatly from the time I was able to practice. However, I will never forget the jeers of my classmates, many of whom came from even greater families than mine. My father told me that those who taunted me were unworthy of my anger. That it is not our lineage or skill that gives us value. It is our deeds that prove our worth. It helps me remember that, each day, I get to choose my own worth. I could prove worthy of my father’s patience and my family heritage. Or I could choose to be unworthy,

such as the ones who taunted me, and let their taunts drag me to their level. I choose to rise above. The actions of those who diminish us make them small. They are not worth my anger. Instead I choose to give them the opportunity to rise.” He sipped his drink. “Sometimes they do.”

Doji Mushari sadly watched his yojimbo go back to her own room for some sleep. She was courteous, intelligent, sensitive. A pleasure to talk with. Maybe a little tempestuous, but that is a luxury for the young. Though he’d not yet been able to see her in combat, he had watched her in her daily kata and did not doubt her focus and lethality. It was ill fortune, and the popularity of that cursed play, that put her in Arashi Seiho’s sights, and the man was a bore. From the gifts, like the stone spheres he’d sent on the first day of summer court, to the petitions for her time, to the endless ‘accidental’ run-ins, the young man refused to accept Arahime’s rejection of him. Jealousy and the current state of the Crane won her no friends among the cad’s peers. The courtier could not blame the young woman for sticking close, though Mushari privately wished, for her sake, she’d been able to make at least one friend. She seemed so lonely and unhappy. It was not a life he would choose for her.

But it might be one the Fortunes would see fit to choose. The older courtier pulled from his sleeve the letter he had received that morning. It was written with friendship and in informal style, frangipani and the scent of vanilla and warm cream paper. But the hand that wrote the calligraphy was well known to him. The Warlord Arashi’s oldest, and most faithful, advisor, Tenmei Nasuko. It was a simple inquiry: had any arrangements been made in Rokugan for the hand of the lovely Kakita Arahime? With those words, Mushari knew the Warlord had noticed his grandson’s interest in the young Crane and thought to temper the young man’s churlish ways with Crane discipline and courtesy. *Whether the Crane in question wants it or not.*

Mushari sighed. The match was not a bad one. Seiho was likely to inherit the position his grandfather held, and his father would hold shortly. The rinjin were, year by year, losing their links to Rokugan and Rokugani culture. Increasing the influence of the Crane would increase his ability to bring in courtiers and artisans to, maybe, temper this hot court. Previous ones had been driven out, but if the Warlord’s wife commanded that they be left alone, they would be.

*But if that wife earned her husband’s displeasure...* Mushari shook his head. Seiho was not generally a patient or persistent man. His infatuations seemed to end quickly. He would tell the truth about Arahime’s status, but respond slowly. And maybe arrange things that would cause Seiho to lose interest in the girl until another Crane, a better match for the young man, could be brought in to capture his attention.

*Maybe someone more...flexible. That would please him. In the meantime, a sparring match with Arahime might persuade him that he has no hopes of drawing her desire and no way of compelling her to his side. Perhaps that will convince him to lose interest for the moment so*



*he will leave the poor girl alone.*

The dojo was lit with bright lanterns, celebrating the coolness of the mid-summer evening. A number of flowers of the court were assembled to view the proceedings, but Kakita Arahime bore them no heed as she stepped onto the floor. Her eyes were only for her opponent.

Most young women would share her perspective; few would deny how handsome Arashi Seiho was. Dressed only in broad hakama of green and silver, his deeply tanned skin rippled across the muscles of his chest. He bowed to Arahime, a friendly smile on his face. "I am grateful, Arahime-san, that Mushari-san has given me this opportunity to see you once again. You have been so diligent in serving him that my greatest efforts to enjoy your company again have come to nothing. I only seek to please you." He almost sounded sincere, but to Arahime's ears every word was false.

*Still...*

For just a moment, she felt a flash of confusion. *Maybe it really is just a difference in the cultures. Maybe he really didn't understand what the play meant... what it means to take one who has been stripped down to nothing... and then take everything that is left. The significance of that to my clan. Maybe he is just doing this because he is a boy who finds me attractive. Maybe he cannot help himself.*

In her memories, she remembered floating leaf-boats with Harun down the stream that trickled through the Academy grounds. They would launch them together from the low, red bridge, and as the boats floated away they would talk of all the adventures that awaited them. But despite Arahime's ever-more-fantastical tales, Harun was always a part of them. Willing to be the hero. Willing to be the one who was rescued too. Never making her more or less than what she wanted to be.

"To test my skill against yours will please me." Arahime kept her tone formal. *In victory or in defeat, a bushi shows his worth in battle. Let him prove he is worthy of me.*

Seiho smiled, walking over the weapon's rack and picking up a pair of shinai. "I am certain in a contest of live steel, you would have me at a disadvantage, Arahime-san," he offered in a self-deprecating tone. "But my grandfather would not permit serious contests of steel in a friendly bout, lest true harm accidentally befall such an honored guest." A few of those watching the contest hid their smiles behind their fans; the weaknesses of the Kakita style were considered famous. After all, if they could not use iaijutsu...

Arahime silently accepted the shinai and returned Seiho's bow before dropping into stance. All anxiety, All despair. All fear and loneliness and hope and regret. She fed them into the void as she watched her opponent evaluate her. Then, thought becomes action in the space

between heartbeats. Her shinai whipped out in front of her, the tip tapping Seiho under the soft point of his chin. She held back, of course, so it did not harm him.

*Dead.*

His shinai tapped against her shoulder less than a second later -- a glancing blow, but one made with strength. They were both in motion now. *He seeks to unbalance my defense...* She whirled and brought the shinai in a slashing blow against the back of the unarmored swordhand with enough force to sting.

*Unhanded....*

Seiho kept coming, however, perhaps convinced that he was strong enough to withstand the disarming strike and the deathblow. He managed to get another strike on her arm. Perhaps in a more serious fight, his greater strength would have slowed her down and pushed her off balance to where she would be able to be knocked down. In a simple sparring match, she was still faster, but it was definitely time to finish this match. *Nothing for it but to prove to Seiho that this is the end of the fight.*

She exhaled and released, bringing all her focus through Seiho's shinai itself, rather than the man holding it. The practice weapon shattered into splinters in his hands.

The Arashi was no longer smiling. He scowled and swung at her with the broken weapon, trying to rely on his strength to overwhelm her, but a crisp command from the sensei stopped him before he could finish the strike. In a pitched battle, it might continue, but not here. Not today.

Without saying a word to the Warlord's grandson, Arahime took a step back and bowed. Her gray eyes watched him carefully. *You were beaten by a woman. By a Crane. By your actions now will you show if you are worthy.*

Seiho threw the broken shinai away in disgust and gave the Kakita duelist a cursory nod. "You were lucky, Arahime-san," he pouted, "that we were fighting with such inferior weapons that mine shattered. I personally find a pair of kama in my hands far better foreplay. "

*Unworthy. Even of my anger.* "I defend my charge with my soul and my steel. That is enough." Her voice remained calm and passive, despite his provocation.

Seiho paused, and then turned on his flashing white smile. "Well, defeat has its pleasures also. If I will not be claiming my victory over you, it is only right that you do the same to me. Claim your prize, gentle maiden of the Crane. I am yours."

The courtiers tittered, and Arahime felt the familiar anger rise, but, remembering Mushari's words, for the first time, let it go. "Leave me alone. I want nothing from you."

She passed the shinai to one of the students of the dojo as she passed and walked out.

The scrollcase was of purest lavender jade. The letter was on paper of ivory white, and the seal was dusted with gold. Doji Mushari sighed. He was honor-bound to have the letter sent to his Clan Champion, Doji Ayumu. But... The ambassador unrolled the letter he was to pass along. He read past the usual pleasantries to the heart of it...

---

*...and so, in light of the mutual respect between our Kingdom and the Crane, and in light of the growing affections between my grandson, Seiho, and Arahime, the daughter of your vassals in the Kakita family, Kyoumi and Kousuda, I request that a marriage be arranged to bring the grace and culture of the Empire closer to our hearts...and the heart of a daughter of the Crane may carry our sincerest good wishes to you and to the Emperor himself...*

---

Mushari slid the letter back into his scrollcase. He had seen no hint of any such ‘affection’ between Seiho and Arahime; indeed, it seemed as though Seiho had started avoiding her after their sparring match much as he hoped they would. There was something...he had noticed that the others in the court quickly changed subjects when his yojimbo was raised, but the matter was difficult to pursue with her present so much of the time. This letter, undoubtedly, was the source of the rumors. The Warlord had decided to proceed. *Well*, he thought as he shook his head sadly. *It is the duty of all to serve. We do what we must.*

## Chapter 6

### ***Early Autumn, 1236 - Second City***

"I hear your Clan prizes excellence in all things. And truly, their failures are both noteworthy and spectacular." The Ota courtier inclined his head at Doji Mushari, as if he had just offered him a compliment. Outside, the heavy monsoon rains beat against the roof of the building with an unrelenting force. "Given such an illustrious track record, I would expect to see nothing but more of the same if the Crane were to take any role in rebuilding the Aerie. " Mushari glanced up at Kakita Arahime calmly, letting the words wash over him as if they were the ranting of a child. "Arahime-san, please can you return to my chambers and bring me the maps? My friend seems very passionate about his own vision for the Aerie. We must see what we can do to bring that vision into being." His words were supportive and patient, but as Arahime left, she and the old Doji exchanged a look that she finally understood. *Unworthy.*

The Ota watched the yojimbo go. "I expect the marriage will be arranged shortly," he offered

mildly, but Mushari was not blind to the sneer in his voice. “Before a child should appear and cause all sorts of dishonor? It is fortunate that she has kept her affairs so discreet, but there will be no hiding a rounded belly in that armor.”

Mushari was a man who prided himself on his patience, who refused to allow himself to be baited for any reason. But he felt an unfamiliar fury blossom in his heart at the rinjin courtier’s words. Pure ice seeped into his tone. “You are making an implication, Ota-san, that may need steel to answer it. Speak plainly.”

Ota Kemmai paled at the unfamiliar chill, realizing that he had finally pushed the toothless old Doji one step too far. “It is only gossip. I should not have listened. But some of the young men of the court have been speaking of the young lady’s....charms....as revealed to them by the young Lord Seiho...and tell of the pillowbook they are writing together. These things happen in Summer Court. No one suspects that either party is unwilling so....”

“Get...” Mushari ruthlessly forced down his stutter. “Get. Out. Tell the head of your household she may come and speak with me herself if she has any hope for a destination for those new spices she seeks to trade. When she asks why the gifts she offers are reviled throughout Rokugan, explain that is because you chose to listen calumny and gossip.”

The speed with which the other courtier fled was gratifying, at least. Doji Mushari clenched his fist. He knew, none better, that Arahime had barely left his side in four months. The idea of her having an affair with Arashi Seiho was unthinkable. That such rumors had been permitted to spread...

This court was out of control. The ties he had carefully cultivated with the older generation, the bonds of friendship and alliance that had sustained two empires, had clearly withered for their children, along with all notions of decency and respect. He had suspected it before, of course. But this had gone too far.

Arahime returned, her hair plastered down with the relentless rain but carefully protecting the precious maps she had retrieved from the Crane embassy. She tilted her head as she scanned the room. “Ota-sama...has left?” she asked in confusion.

“Yes. We are going to return to the Embassy now. I have a number of letters to write. You also. We will be travelling soon.”

Already, Mushari was preparing lists in his head. But he suspected bloodshed would happen before this ended. Arahime was kuge. Some things cannot be tolerated. Some words go too far.

The meeting was private and hastily arranged. While younger generations of rinjin in Zogeku may not see the worth of their ties to the Emperor and to Rokugan, the Warlord Arashi

certainly understood. From the depths of the jungles around Zogeku came the empire-ending evil of KaliMa, and the mysteries of those lands would require defenses far greater than Zogeku alone could raise. And just beyond the borders of Zogeku lay the Yodotai, with their relentless armies that would soon come. The Warlord lacked the geography or the troops to halt such an enemy. It would take closer ties to Rokugan to survive such storms. When the Crane Ambassador sought an immediate private audience on reasons of grave import, he was heeded.

Doji Mushari wore his finest kimono, trimmed with silver. His expression was stern, and he held in his hand his fan as though it were both sword and shield. He bowed very low before the leader of all Zogeku. "Thank you for meeting me on such short notice."

The Warlord nodded in formal greeting. "Mushari-san. Anything that is a grave concern to our allies is a concern of mine. What troubles you?"

Mushari straightened. "Lord Arashi-dono. For over fifteen years, I have served as liaison with your people. Together we have formed agreements of trade and kinship that have served to mutual benefit. In Rokugan, we have driven back the forces of the Onyx until they stand on their last legs. In Zogeku, you have achieved stability and trade in partnership. I thought we had understandings between us to act with honor in our dealings. "

The Warlord nodded, his black gaijin eyes growing gravely concerned at the amiable Doji's grim tone. "Indeed, Doji-san. I too had such understandings."

The older courtier nodded sharply. "If you wish to maintain those understandings, you will keep your court in check, Arashi-dono. My yojimbo and the woman whose hand you have made formal request for from my Champion is being treated most dishonorably. She is kuge; her family line goes back to the dawn of the Empire, a line of Empresses. And your people drag that name through the mud with scandalous speech that I attest is untrue. This is not how alliances are kept. This is not how marriage matches are made."

The Warlord frowned, troubled with confusion at the Doji's reactions. "You speak of relations between your yojimbo Arahime and my grandson, Seiho? But this match is not displeasing to me. If they have passion for each other, surely granting marriage grants all legitimacy. Why would this anger the Crane?"

Mushari's words were dark. "Lies do anger us. The sully of a young woman's honor does anger us. It puts future marriages of the line in doubt; it mocks her family's legacy. Rumors even circulate that she may be with child. We cannot allow such words to continue. I would send for a kenshinzen or unleash her upon those who would besmirch her name, save for the fact it would spread the rumors further to worse effect. This is only the most visible wound that marks the disrespect for Rokugan and the Crane that has festered within your court. It must end, or else the Crane will withdraw from the colonies with all of the assets that are owed us."

A short moment of consideration, then the Warlord gave a slight nod. "You propose?"

Mushari folded his hands around his fan. "As soon as the monsoons storms pass, which should be very shortly, I will take my yojimbo and we shall depart the court. I will...seek out a harbor for the gathering of sea snails for dyes. It is the time the seasons are most favorable for it. We will be gone for at least a month. During that time, Arashi-dono, I ask that you get the affairs of your court in order. End this behavior. And then, perhaps, we can begin negotiations for the hand of Arahime and the resumption of trade and good will between our empires." He slowly inhaled and exhaled, releasing any hint of anger in his voice to speak calmly and plainly. "This can be an opportunity, Arashi-sama. This element of your court has been damaging you more than you know. Improved ties between Empire and Colonies will bring many benefits to both of us. Now the war with the Onyx is drawing near an end, use this opportunity to make those ties strong again. We shall all benefit."

Though there was much that could be considered alien between the culture of Zogeku and the culture of Rokugan, there was no doubting the sincerity in Doji Mushari's voice. This was a matter that could not be taken lightly. Mushari's departure was an act of mercy; it gave the Warlord time to investigate and resolve matters that, it was clear, had gone much further than the leaders of the great houses had believed. He wanted this marriage to the Crane. There was much salvaging to be done.

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Mushari-san. I wish you luck on your dye-gathering expedition, and I hope you find the climate for negotiation much more friendly when you return."

Kakita Arahime folded and sealed the letter before passing it to the courier to carry it with the other embassy correspondence. *It will get there someday.*

---

*Dear Harun-san,*

*I hope this letter reaches you. There are no boats to carry letters during the summer or during the monsoon season, so it has been a long time.*

*I hope you are well. Before I left, Mother said you would likely end up stationed in the Imperial Legions when you returned from musha shuga, under your father's command. Or maybe you will stand as part of the Unicorn forces with the Shogun. I know from the communications to the Crane Embassy that fighting this summer has been very intense, especially as clans close in on the Onyx capital. Both armies will certainly be involved.*

*In the contest of who has travelled the most, as you undoubtedly know if you get this letter, I win this round. I bet you did not think this was a victory I would claim*

*from you.*

*Life here is different. Doji Mushari, the ambassador and my charge, is a kind and good man. But I do not fit in well here. Here I am always 'The Crane', and never just a person. I suppose you would know how it is. At least I tried to fight those battles on your behalf when we were young. I just try to learn patience and focus on protecting my charge and eagerly await the day when I might be permitted to return.*

*Still. I refuse to complain about the duty that my Lord has given me. The jungle flowers are beautiful and there is so much green. There is always enough to eat; as many fruits as one could wish. I like mangoes; they taste a little like the peach we shared once when Asahina Noriko came to visit the Academy. Rice with lentils is good. The carvers of wood and stone are very skilled. Some of the music does make me want to dance. While I cannot think of anything else good right now, even when things are horrible, I want you to know that I will be fine.*

*We are leaving in two days on an expedition to find harbors for the gathering of dye whelks. I am not certain why. This expedition seems rather sudden on the Ambassador's part, but I do not blame him from leaving Second City for a time. This place will try the patience of anyone. I know I will be glad to leave. I will write again when we return.*

*If you are part of the battles to come, I know your deeds will be filled with honor. That is part of who you are. I know you will show your worth in every way on the battlefield. But, if it is not too much to ask, please be wise and value your life too.*

*You are precious to me. I should not say it, but it would be a lie not to. Even if you do join the Unicorn. Even if you end up following the wind and travelling the Empire and Karasu-sama gives you the freedom to join your mother's family, I think I will always end up as a string tied to your kite. You are simply going to have to accept that. I am not ready to let go of that string at least until I tell you properly about how I feel about you missing my Topaz Championship.*

*I miss you, you silly baka.*

*Patiently,  
Kakita Arahime*

---

## Chapter 7

### **Early Autumn, 1236 – The Coast off the Ivory Kingdoms**

Arahime watched as the last fishing boat and staked net disappeared from sight. Doji

Mushari had shared with her the planned course of the trip. The ship, the Momomaru, was manned by an Arashi crew familiar with the waters up and down the Ivory coastline. The yojimbo interacted with them very little after realizing the ship's first mate was Arashi Parushi, the man who had made a poor joke about the Kakita school when she was visiting the Military district with Seiho before Summer Court. Still, Parushi and the crew were diligent and polite now, and Seiho had removed Parushi from his circle completely after the incident. *An appropriate enough cost for such disrespect.*

Passage down the river past Twin Forks to Kalani's Landing, with its crumbling stone bridges and stepped banks, had been smooth and peaceful. The boundless gray-green ocean lay ahead of them, still cloudy and churning with the last of the monsoon rains. From here, they were to sail east, past the Aerie and a number of smaller islands that dotted the stormy waters, until they reached Aramasu's Vigilance, where the sea was made hostile by reefs and whatever monstrous creatures might arise from the Sea of Shadows. Such dangerous waters were too risky to venture, so they would then turn west, passing again the mouth of the twin rivers, to reach the lighthouse of Suitengu's Torch and the jungle coastline beyond. They planned to travel up the coastline to the edge of the distance that had been explored by adventurous Mantis sailors, and then turn back and return to Second City.

The glimmering star that served as the lighthouse was already visible in the early light of evening, but it was receding as their ship made its way slowly eastward. The Crane woman felt similarly left in darkness, for although she knew her trip and destination, the ambassador still had given her no sense of its true purpose. To venture away so long just to search for shells, a job a hired crew could easily do, seemed foolish. She gripped the railing of the ship tighter, trying not to focus on her own frustration.

The old courtier emerged from below decks and came to stand beside her. "Beautiful, isn't it?" he asked mildly.

Arahime did not turn to look at the older man. "It is beautiful." She paused for a moment as a gull gave a lonely cry that echoed across the sighing waters. "We've come far away from any port, Mushari-sama." She turned to face him directly. "Please. Now can you tell me why are we here?"

Doji Mushari gave a soft sigh. "Very well." He led the way down into his cabin where he knelt and poured tea for her.

Once there, the words he spoke were direct. "Arahime-san. I spoke to you before of enemies the Crane have in this court. The situation has been difficult, and I know you have suffered for it. As, you know, have I. However, we are here because a great breach of honor has been committed, and I refuse to allow such any longer. We are leaving to grant the Warlord, this **one** chance to compel his court into respectful dealings, or else he will find his means greatly reduced indeed."

The young woman frowned, her jaw tightening. "Tell me."



“You have already guessed. Yes, the rumors of the court are that you and Arashi Seiho are conducting a secret affair. I do not know, at least not specifically, where the rumors started, though I know that Seiho has not denied them. He may have encouraged them. He may have been too ashamed or cowardly to confront them in protection of your honor. Or he may have been innocent of spreading them, but has not denied them out of a desire to fuel his own ego. I cannot tell.”

Arahime could not hide the anger and hurt in her expression, so Mushari hastened to continue. “The important thing you need to know is that I know you are innocent. Your clan knows you are innocent, and we refuse to allow this to besmirch your good name. I am giving Lord Arashi time to address this within his court, but the Crane consider this matter grave enough that we will take strong measures if he fails to do so. Things will not continue as they have been. I still cannot have war between the Crane and Zogeku, but this will be rectified. Do you understand me, Arahime-san?”

Betrayal, anger, grief, loneliness, fear, shame....the emotions washed over Arahime like the monsoon-driven crests that had battered the shoreline they traced. She could not keep the salt-tears from the corners of her eyes. The dishonor even of the accusations, what that meant to her house....she rubbed fiercely at her eyes with the back of her hand and set her face like flint.

“Thank you for telling me, Mushari-sama,” she said quietly. “I understand why you said nothing before. I am grateful my clan does not think so of me and I know they will treat me with justice.” *But I should be allowed to win my own fights. I should have had the right to duel to clear my name.*

As she wept silently into her pillow that evening, she longed for her home in Ootosan Uchi. For the peaceful gardens of Shiro sano Kakita. She tried to push down the feeling of homesickness. And the feeling that Doji Mushari was still holding something back from her.

Weeks passed. There were sudden squalls, not unusual for the end of monsoon season, but generally the weather stayed well. The time was quiet, spent sitting on the sunny beach watching the heimen divers dive for snails, playing go with Mushari, or watching the coastline glide slowly by. They turned from the east to travel west, back past the twin mouths of the river and Kalani's Landing, where they took on more supplies, and headed towards the Unknown Lands. The coastline of the Unknown Territory varied. A beach of pure, silvery-white sand ended at a cliff of black stone split into strange, hexagonal columns. Long stretches of coastline had trees growing right into the water, strange trees with wide leaves and coiling roots that looked like snakes. The sailors called the trees ‘Mangroves’.

Once Arahime saw a tiger, a huge cat of orange and red, leaping into the waves in pursuit of a small deer that had darted out of the forest. Around the boat, lazy in the water, there

occasionally swam the creature known as a crocodile. A heimen diver explained to her that the crocodiles were very dangerous, but were attracted to splashing and noise. They could be avoided if not hungry or threatened, which is why the divers dared venture the dangerous water for the snails. But even with the threats of crocodiles or tigers, Arahime dreaded returning to Second City even more. But it was inevitable that the day would come.

Two days into the journey back, the duelist returned to her futon for the evening. Doji Mushari had dismissed her early. Heavy clouds had rolled in during the day and the sea was getting choppy with the promise of a light evening squall, and such seas did little to settle the older Doji's stomach. The coastline that they passed was of undifferentiated mangrove, and any creatures it might have sheltered seemed content to hide from the impending weather. There was little for it but to turn in early.

When she arrived, there on the green and white blankets lay a pair of letters. She frowned, picking up one in well-made blue paper, scented, she could tell, with vanilla. It was old and unsealed; she opened it easily. The calligraphy was instantly recognizable.

---

*Dear Tenmei Nasuko-san,*

*Thank you for your kind words about my yojimbo, Kakita Arahime. She is indeed, beautiful, intelligent, dutiful, and honorable. As you hoped, she is not yet engaged, though I am certain she will be soon. She would be a credit to any house she joined, in the Empire or beyond it.*

*I certainly appreciate Arashi-sama's interest in a marriage match between his grandson Seiho and the Crane. It would be in the interest of both to improve relations between these houses. These things lie in the hands of the nakados, of course, but I will do what I can to facilitate such a discussion.*

*Sincerely,  
Doji Mushari*

---

A sting of betrayal. *A marriage match? Mushari is trying to prepare a marriage match between me and Seiho? Is all of this trip just a chance to end the rumors and make sure I am no longer angry so I would be willing to accept such a thing?* Her mind raced through a thousand implications, benefits to her family and clan, the changes to the Colonies, squared against Seiho's arrogance and the disdain of the Zogeki. So much balanced against one small thing....only the sacrifice of all hope for her future happiness. And Harun.

Arahime opened the second letter. This one was newer, the paper plain and unmarked, the calligraphy without particular merit.

---

*Kakita Arahime-sama,  
I know when last we spoke, my words to you were shameful. But I ask you to see  
past such differences to our mutual benefit. I have tried to come forward earlier in  
this voyage, but shame held me back and I never found the right time. But now  
time is running out. A marriage between yourself and Arashi Seiho, while it may  
seem of value to toothless old men, will bring misery to you both. Neither Zogeku  
or Rokugan are served by your unhappiness. I have spoken with Seiho-sama. I  
believe there is a way we can prevent this match while retaining the honor of all  
involved. If this is your wish also, meet me on deck tonight after the midnight bell  
is rung and I will tell you my plan.  
In confidence,  
Arashi Parushi*

---

The young woman's eyes narrowed. *I will go. I will listen to him. But I will never, ever trust him.*

A pair of lanterns lit the deck with quiet pools of light. The stars and moon were hidden by the overcast sky, but the rough silhouette of the jungle served as sufficient guide. The ship was not at anchor; the sea was choppy enough that an anchored boat invited in water washed over the sides. Fortunately, the area was clear of reefs. A steady breeze blew eastward towards Kalani's Landing, so there was no reason to stop for the night anyway. The sailors were eager to return home. One of the sailors held the helm, another made minor adjustments to the sail when needed, and Arashi Parushi awaited her on deck, keeping watch.

Kakita Arahime took comfort in the steady weight of her daisho on her hip. She wished for her armor, but had had to acknowledge that wearing armor shipboard was foolish. "Parushi-san," she offered, focusing on keeping her On steady and her voice cool. "You wished to speak with me?"

The big Zogeki stood near the railing, watching for pirates or any other that might threaten the ship. He looked over at her. Arashi Purashi was tall and muscular, fairer of skin than many of the others of his family. It was easy to see the Mantis blood bred true in him. He bowed. "Thank you for coming, Arahime-sama. I am..." he hesitated, "...sorry...that I did not give the letter to you earlier. I did not know how to talk about it. And with the false rumors, it was even more difficult."

*A heart of flint. A heart of steel.* “When was the letter sent?”

“I’m not certain. Seiho did not give it to me until just before we left. I don’t think he wants this match either. He’s given to fascinations, maybe. But he’s young. He’d rather be the playboy. He doesn’t want the responsibility of being husband, or Warlord, a day before he has to assume it. Marrying, even to one as honorable as you are, Kakita-sama, would not permit that.”

That, Arahime could believe was true. “And you have a plan?” she asked cautiously.

“I do.” Parushi gave a look across the deck at one of the sailors who was casually mending a line that had snapped in a sudden gust of wind. He gestured for Arahime to come closer so they wouldn’t be overheard.

Arahime frowned and approached, glancing towards the dark and choppy waters and the black shadows of the shoreline. “What is it, then?” she said, her voice suspicious, but quiet.

**“This.”**

Purashi twisted and grabbed the back of the smaller woman’s haori with both hands, hauling sideways and upwards. Arahime flailed, her hands finding nothing but air as she reached out to grab anything she could to prevent her fall. But void and darkness surrounded her and churning waters lay below her. She was flying over the side of the ship and into the tropical waters with a splash.

The world melted into a gasp for air and a thousand bubbles. The light of the lanterns on the ship was enough, just barely, to orient her towards the surface. A few strokes, and she was able to reach it with a sputtering gasp. But before she could even cry out, another small wave crashed over her, pushing her back under again. When she made it up to the surface again, the lanterns were smaller and further in the distance. She seized another breath to call out to the ship for help, *Though who would hear but Purashi himself...those others on the deck were certainly his men, or they would already be turning around for me...*, but another wave shoved her down again.

By the time she emerged from the next set of choppy waves, no one on the ship could have heard her over the sound of the sea anyway.

## Chapter 8

### **Mid Autumn, 1236 – The Unknown Lands**

Left in darkness, fighting for every breath, Arahime knew she only had limited strength left. Splashing and calling fruitlessly would only expend her strength and attract crocodiles. Panicking would solve

nothing. She praised the fortunes for the time her mother had taken to teach her to swim, but the weight of her hakama bore her down now. And she had to save her swords. *I may die here, but I will not lose my grandmother's daisho to the sea.* She took a deep breath, and slipped under the waves. With one hand, she pulled her blades around and clutched them tightly to her chest. With her other, she loosened her hakama and pulled them off underwater. Wrestling with the sodden fabric was difficult; she lost both geta in the process, but when her legs were free of the silk, she was able to move more freely. She kicked to force her head above the surface and sucked in another breath of air.

She felt the brush of fabric from the hakama drift by her leg as it was gently pulled downwards. She hooked it with a foot, then gasped another breath of air before she sank once more below the waters. She grabbed at the loose hakama with her free hand, and kicked again to force herself up again. The salt water stung her eyes, but she focused on her task. She slid her daisho into the leg of the hakama, then bound the hakama tightly around her chest so the swords were held tightly by the cloth and had no chance of slipping out. She rested in the waters once her swords were safe. The choppy waves continued to wash over her, but they did not grow worse and she was able to keep her head above the water now her hands and legs were free.

The darkness made direction hard to discern, but the sounds of the waves breaking against the shore seemed to be in the direction that matched what she remembered. A shaft of moonlight from a break in the heavy cloud cover gave her enough of a silhouette to confirm it. *Kisada, Fortune of Persistence, help me,* she prayed, though she expected little answer. Still, the tide was coming in, and it carried the Crane bushi with it. With slow, decidedly ungraceful strokes, checking often on her weapons, Arahime swam towards shore.

Arahime had reached a place far, far beyond exhaustion as she crawled up the twisted roots of one of the strange mangrove trees. Wild and dangerous animals snuffled and cried out in the darkness. But she was ashore. She would not lose the blades of Masarugi to the waves. She could die this moment, and she would have already succeeded. Clutching her daisho, curled up near the big mangrove's trunk and cradled in its roots like a child in her mother's arms, the young woman slept.

Sunlight, almost too bright, filtered through the mangrove leaves, finally awakening the sleeping girl. Arahime's whole body ached with the exertions of the previous night and the hard, snaky roots of the mangrove, and she was thirsty. She forced her eyes open.

She found herself on a small, muddy patch of shoreline, where the mangrove trees pressed all the way to the water's edge. It took a moment for her to orient, but she remembered the maps of her passing and the journey west, and was able to form a rough idea of where she was. To the north, the mysterious jungle, a vast unknown she had never thought to enter. To the south, only the gray-green sea. On the shore to the west the mangroves grew even thicker and more dense, going right out into the water. To the east, the mangroves were broken up by more patches of muddy earth, like where she currently stood. The ground looked like it was covered with snakes, and vines and lianas hung from the branches. Somewhere, even further to the east, lay the lighthouse of Suitengu's Torch, and the edge of the

kingdom of Zogeku. But that was at least six days by boat, if she remembered the sailors' discussions correctly. She had no idea how far it was as a journey overland.

There was no sign of a kobune. *If they have harmed Mushari....* She knew the threat was meaningless, but she found some comfort in the idea that the Crane would be sure to unleash the wrath of the Empire if their only ambassador and his yojimbo had come to harm. The water was still choppy with the stiff wind, but the cloud cover had lightened in the night and the sun came through in patches.

*Nothing for it, then.* She was aware she knew nothing about survival in this terrible and dangerous land save what the heimen divers had told her during the journey on the coast. But she was thirsty and soaked to the bone. Addressing those things would be a start.

Arahime stripped off her clothes: juban and haori and obi, laying them up over the branches of the tree to dry. She undid the bundle of her hakama and spread that out to dry also. While she, and the clothing, dried out a little, she observed her surroundings.

A trickle of fresh water seemed to be coming from the jungle, weaving its way along the muddy flat and through the mangrove trees. It looked green and brackish, but enough to rinse the salt from her skin. It didn't take long for her cotton juban to dry. Before dressing, however, she used it to carefully clean and dry the blades of her daisho. Without oil, if she stayed near the ocean, the steel would suffer for it, but for the moment they were well enough. She tied her obi around her waist and slid her daisho into place.

Water. The turgid water running across the ground looked dangerous, but it had rained last night. Many of the trees had broken or fallen, victims, no doubt, of the recent monsoons. She found one with a small hollow space in the stump and found there some fresh water from last night's rain. She drank deeply, scooping the water with her hands. With the sweet blessings of the water kami, she felt like, perhaps, she might survive.

Not all of the trees were mangroves. One, which looked as though it had fallen only recently, was similar to the palm trees that bore the coconuts she had tasted in Second City. She picked her way across the roots of the mangroves to reach the head. About eight good-sized green fruits were clustered in the palm branches. She would need those for food, at the very least, and her time in second city had taught her of the white liquid that lay in them. She had also eaten a dish one evening, a stir fry of vegetables that included the tender heart of the stem of the coconut palm. That could serve as food also. But how to carry it?

She glanced over at her hakama. They were not likely to do well moving through these trees. They had served as a bag, of sorts, to carry her swords. They could do so again. She drew the kozuka, the small knife that supported the tsuba of her wakizashi. *My ancestors would not be ashamed of using these blades in the ways I must in service of bringing my daisho home and defending my charge,* she thought, as she carefully cut the hakama legs off just above the knees. The sharp blade sliced easily through the fabric. She trimmed to a minimum the long straps that tied the hakama on, leaving her four lengths of strapping to use.

As she worked, she watched the waters, waiting to see if, possibly, the ship would return. No sail appeared. Arahime used the kozuka to pierce the bottom and top of the two pieces of cloth cut from her hakama, and then used the straps to tie them tightly shut at the bottom, and hold them open with a strap for her shoulder at the top.

She took a moment to admire her work, and then her stomach rumbled, loudly.

The hunger deflated any feeling of victory she had experienced in finishing the bags. *I have the coconuts. But I will need to be sparing.* Arahime sighed. There were many lean years she had experienced growing up. She rarely had been hungry herself, but there were whole years early on when the adults refused to eat with the children at the academy. At first, she thought it was their aloofness, that they were embarrassed to be seen with the children. It wasn't until her mother, Kyoumi, finally explained that those years were times the adults were going without to make sure the children remained fed. She knew there was a time once, in the Empire, when food was not rationed, when the guards did not stand guard as fiercely upon the storehouses as on the gates. She imagined those days would come again, but she had never known them. Still, though she had gone to bed hungry before, she feared it now. *Too hungry, and I will grow weak. There is not enough food here to stay. Or water.* She comforted herself by drinking some of the water remaining in the tree stump, but it was disappearing fast, even on this overcast day.

Using the tip of her katana, she cut free the green coconuts and put them in her bags. Then, determined to eat, but to save the coconuts for their water, she started trimming away the younger fronds and bark to get to the palm cabbage at the heart of the stem. Once she'd cut the trunk down far enough, a slice of her katana removed it from the palm, leaving the white, pithy core. She peeled off some strands of it and chewed. They were tasteless, but they were edible. She put the rest into her bag and, finally at the end of her strength, with no ships on the horizon, she climbed back up into the upper roots of the mangrove to sleep.

It was dark but the moon was up when a low coughing sound awakened her. Arahime could hear the sound of something grunting around on the muddy strip very near her. A lance of fear pierced her, but she fought down the emotion to hold very still until the moonlight revealed what she faced. The moonlit ground below her offered no comfort, for emerging from the waves gently splashing up on the muddy stretch of ground were a pair of large crocodiles. She stayed frozen, praying they were not hunting, that they would have no reason to come after her. *I might be able to take one...maybe. But the heimen said they have hides of iron. I don't think I could take both. Not in the dark, on this terrain.* She watched as one of the great creatures looked up at her, then continued on to the muddy base of another mangrove near her. She could hear it begin to dig the muddy leaf litter, building its nest. The second was also moving to lay eggs nearby.

The hours had stretched on, but the crocodiles did not leave. Arahime was trembling with weariness, when the sight of motion near her made her flinch. At first she thought it was an enormous spider, crawling from the tree in the evening twilight. It was with only a little relief that she realized that it was no spider. It was instead an enormous crab, larger than one of the coconuts she'd found, venturing down the very tree she had been sheltering. Because of the presence of the reptiles, she could do

nothing as it slowly crawled over her leg and settled by her foot.

The girl was exhausted, but she did not dare sleep or move all night. At dawn, the two crocodiles slid into the water to hunt. The instant they were truly gone, Arahime drew her katana and sliced the patient crab in half. She picked up the pieces and dumped each half in her bag. It kept moving slowly. *Not a spider. A crab...and maybe food.* She wiped her blade on haori sleeve and sheathed it. *Food. That's one good thing, at least.*

She would not be able to survive another night here, where the female crocodiles had laid their eggs and would return to protect their nests. She would not survive without sleep. Arahime drank the last of the water trapped in the tree trunk and slung her bags of coconuts, palm cabbage, and crab over her shoulder. She watched the water warily, but her eyes were only for the east, along the coastline that would lead her back to Suitengu's Torch. Even nearer was the next rise of black cliffs that might keep her out of the wet to where she could make camp and have a safer view. *If I could only follow the shoreline...* But nearby, all she could see was more mangroves pushing right into the water, and the cuts of channels too wide to cross, at least at their mouths.

Her only hope was to go deeper into the jungle, past the mangroves and crocodiles of the beach, and then try to make her way to that high ground she had seen from afar. *I have been lucky so far. I pray my luck holds out. There is nothing else I can do.* Arahime tore a tougher strip off the palm heart and chewed it as she made her way eastward and deeper into the jungle.

## Chapter 9

### **Mid Autumn, 1236 – The Unknown Lands**

*There is new prey in her hunting grounds today.  
Soft prey. Sweet prey.  
Toothless prey. Clawless prey.*

*Yes, it had the scent of the heaven of all animals upon it. Lesser creatures would turn away from such prey. But she was no animal. She was the daughter of the Endless Hunger, the spawn of the Red Bashe who brought eternal death. Whose fang could slay a god. She was Bonedrinker. She feared no wrath of beast or spirit. And she was hungry.*

*But first...to not be foolish. She had hunted and eaten such prey before. Many had a hard metal shell around them when she faced them, but this one looked soft and tender. Even so, these creatures were tricky. They could summon the sharp tooth that cut deeply. The prey she had eaten before carried their tooth in their hands. Still, they never got the chance to use their tooth before she crushed the life out of them. And no tooth, however sharp, could be summoned before she could encircle her prey. She saw no tooth in this prey's grip, but she must be wary when dealing with such creatures. She had no enjoyment of pain.*

*Besides, another was near. The cat could steal her prey first, it was true. But the cat would not hesitate to strike at **Her** should she let down her guard within his territory. The lord of these woods would attack while she swallowed her meal and force her to disgorge. He would give her no rest*



*while she digested her prey here.*

*It was no matter. She was wise and cunning and had no need of haste. She could see which way this stumbling prey was moving through the cat's territory, and await it nearby. At just the right moment...*

*The bonedrinker slithered off. She was hungry, but she was always hungry. She was a hundred years old and patient. She could wait a little longer.*

Once she was a safe distance from the crocodiles and her thirst and hunger could no longer be easily ignored, Arahime sat down on a fallen log to rest. She removed the bisected crab from one of her bags first. *It will spoil quickly anyway. I can't save it.* She looked at the creature with assessing eyes. *It's not so different from the crabs they would catch in traps near Ootosan Uchi. The meat is probably fine.* She had never prepared such a thing for herself, but eating crab raw was not strange for her. Seafood around the purified city had started growing more abundant in the last 5 years, and crabs were carried live in barrels to other places like the Academy. Arahime used the kogai hairpin from her wakizashi to break open the crab, pushing it into the crevasses and eating the tender, sweet flesh. A few of the nearby hollows where leaves attached to stem still held some of the last night's rains, and she could drink. She gratefully cleaned her kogai and dutifully buried the remains of the crab.

Refreshed by the protein, the Crane samurai-ko had to face the next obstacle. Without geta, her feet were bound to get injured, and she shuddered to think of what would happen if she found herself unable to walk. Fortunately, she still had her haori and jubon. She didn't like the idea of giving up much of the haori; the night had been cool, and it would be colder still under the trees. But she was able to cut the sleeves from her jubon and use strips cut from them to bind pieces of bark to her feet. It was a rough effort, but it would serve.

Five hours later, Arahime realized she was beginning to lose track of the sun. When there were spaces between the trees, she could see it shining ahead of her. But now it had passed overhead. Even though the ground was clearer and less muddy the trees overhead had grown closer together, casting all into a perpetual gloom. Each time she came across the broad channel of a river in the jungle, she ended up being driven inland in order to be able to cross, and it was harder to determine where she was.

Weariness was overwhelming her also. She was forced to turn her attention to finding a place to rest. She had no hammock to string and no way of making one, and she had no desire to sleep on the ground. *Ants that would eat a samurai out of his armor...* She shuddered at the remembered warning. Finally, she found a tree with a few promising low branches. She picked up a pair of fallen limbs and rested them parallel to two of the branches, creating a space big enough to sit on and at least a few feet above the ground. Too tired to do more, she crawled into the pathetic nest and quickly fell asleep.

It was just before dusk when she awakened. It was hard to see in the growing gloom. Around and

below her, the jungle had grown very still and quiet. Except there. Not four feet away, gleaming, powerful, and majestic in the darkness, Arahime could see a pair of glowing golden eyes. A hide of dark orange and black strips. No mane, but a powerful head and jaws. And paws that could pull her easily from her poor shelter with a single swipe. ***Tiger.***

She knew that she should draw and attack, that there was no chance for her should she become pinned by the magnificent animal. But for that moment, fear, awe, or raw instinct stayed her hand.

She stared into its glowing eyes; entranced.

It stared back at her.

Arahime prepared herself for death.

The tiger merely blinked slowly at her, turned, and walked away, disappearing into the darkened forest.

Arahime slept again. She did not understand why the tiger had not claimed her life. In the end, though, she decided that, whether it was her fate to die in a tiger's jaws or not, she would surely die if she did not sleep.

In the morning, thirst and hunger stalked her again. *Time for cutting practice.* At the Academy, you were not allowed to compete in the Topaz championship unless you'd proved your draw against an iron do, an iron chestpiece. Arahime knew the shape and hardness of the coconut would prove a challenge, but this, at least, was something she'd been trained for. She was rested and as fresh as could be hoped for. She braced the coconut between two fallen limbs and took her stance.

*Breathe.*

*Focus.*

*Strike.*

Her silvery blade flashed through the muggy air and sliced the top of the green coconut, sending it spinning. Arahime couldn't help but smile at the clean cut, and, aware of the humor of the gesture, bowed to the coconut. She wiped and resheathed her katana.

The coconut water may have been the sweetest, most delicious thing she had ever tasted. Even after just a day the leaf-trapped rainwater had been growing stagnant, but this was sweet and fresh and she drank greedily. Using the kogai again, she was able to scrape free some of the coconut flesh and eat it. Arahime found it delicious. She gave thanks to her ancestors that had left this worthy blade to her. It had saved her life many times already, and she had only been in the jungle three days.

*The sweet prey has come out.*

*Her tongue could easily mark the boundary of the Tiger, though the prey walked oblivious through the domain it had taken her two days to pass.*

*She who was Bonedrinker was unwilling to challenge the cat, especially while digesting. But he was simple to avoid. The treetops were as easy to pass as the ground to her. She glided, silent, limb to limb, watching the passage, waiting for her moment. A moment of greater cover, greater gloom. A moment of distraction.*

*The trees grew closer together here, leaning in, dark. Vines hung from the branches. It was her favorite type of hunting ground.*

*A few more steps.*

*She shifted slightly in the treetops to loosen her coils, and then release....*

*"This one will be mine!"*

The leaves gave only the barest rustle of warning from above, but trained reflex from ten thousand hours of sword took hold. The blade of Masarugi was out of its saya before even thought, moving with force in front and above her.

It connected and sliced through scale, skin, flesh, bone, before Arahime had even registered what had attacked her. The head and a foot or so of enormous serpent, still moving, fell to the ground at her feet, no longer attached to the body.

The Kakita had no time to stare at it, for the snake's attack had been made with more than just the head. Already in motion, weight overborn, coil after coil of reptile fell from the close, vine-filled tree canopy above. Though no volition moved those lifeless coils, they were massive and heavy, and they dropped on the much smaller human below. The weight of them knocked Arahime to the ground.

A sharp pain stung Arahime's back as she collapsed under the weight, driven down onto a sharp rock propped amidst the roots of the tree above. But that was an inconsequential pain compared to the giant snake that was crushing her with its deadweight. She let go her katana and heaved with all her strength, finally pulling herself free of the body of the giant serpent.

It took much more pushing and tugging to win free her katana from under the still-twitching corpse. Only then, after she'd cleaned and resheathed the blade, could Arahime take a look at the creature which had attacked her.

It was, she could see now, an enormous snake. Its body was thicker across than her forearm. Its blunt, squarish head was even larger. Its scales were swirled patterns of dark greens, blacks, reds, and browns, indistinguishable from the trees overhead. Golden eyes with slit pupils stared blankly at her, and the open mouth had wickedly sharp-looking teeth.

Arahime stared at it, unable to even comprehend the size of this creature. She could feel the trickle of blood running down her back where she had caught against the rock, and the trickle of sweat running down her face. Suddenly the overwhelming nature of the challenge of this place finally impressed itself upon her, with a blow as heavy as the descending serpent.

She had been raised in the palaces of the Emperor, in the halls of the Kakita Dueling Academy where the Emperor's own son studied. She had never even been outside that bejeweled world. She only listened to stories of the dangers beyond those walls. She knew those dangers were out there; she was sure Harun had seen them already. But she, even in her journey to Second City, had never really left the courts.

And now she, the pretty, white-haired Crane princess, was all alone in a vast, trackless wild. She was surrounded by creatures who could eat her, from tigers to leeches to bats. Creatures so huge they could eat an elephant, if the stories of the Red Hunger were true. Creatures she could never hope to fight. And it was getting harder and harder to tell where she was. She thought she was heading east, but she couldn't find the paths south that would reach the shoreline; the trees grew too dense. She had nothing, not even a sense of direction, to show her the way. All she had were the swords of Masarugi, a torn haori and jubon, six coconuts, the giant, probably poisonous, body of an enormous dead snake...and...what else, exactly?

*Harun would say “**Hope**” in that calm, quiet way of his. He'd just put his head down and plow through it over and over until it is done. He probably wouldn't even wonder if it was hopeless. It was always me with ten thousand questions and no answers.*

*Arahime wasn't going to give up yet. She'd done well so far. But Second City...I could be trying to reach the Jade Sun. I'd make it **there** alive just as easily. If I make it back to Second City, maybe I'll go to Tengoku next...go right up the Jade Dragon and ask him to start guiding Ningen-do again. Maybe talk to a few Kami along the way.*

The image was so funny, her course so impossible, that at that moment she did the only thing she could do when faced with the hand her fate had dealt her.

She sat down on the coils of the dead snake and laughed until she cried.

## Chapter 10

## **Mid Autumn, 1236 – Lion Lands - Guest Author Kakita Harun!**

The only thing good about a frustrating day on the battlefield, Harun knew, was that it ended. As the sun was setting, the Kyoujin Platoon patched up their minor wounds and saw to their horses. It was nightfall when Harun finally made it to the fire, by then Shinjo Sayaka had put on a pot of rice to boil as well enough yakatori skewers for everyone. And as it was her night to cook, that meant there would also be flat bread.

Harun sat down to wait, pulling a small piece of paper from inside his kimono and unfolding it carefully. He had ready the words many times, he knew them by heart by now. But still he liked to read them.

---

*Dear Harun,  
I am writing to let you know I made it safely to Second City. I only just arrived,  
and this is the last boat back to the Empire before summer begins and all the ships  
stop.*

*I'm sorry that I was angry that you were late. I am sure you had good reasons for  
it. You never go back on your word, ever, and I know you tried your best.*

*I wish I could have waited, but when Lord Ayumu gives an order, it is my place,  
just as it is yours, to serve as best we can.*

*This city looks so strange and wonderful. I am sure it is full of adventure. I will  
have so many good stories to tell you when I get home. And you can tell me of the  
life with the Unicorn. Of what it is like to ride freely across the plains.*

*I cannot wait to share all these stories with you some day. That would be enough  
for me.*

*Fondly,  
Kakita Arahime.*

---

In his mind, Harun could see Arahime serving the Clan in Zogeku, the white-haired grey-eyed Crane girl no doubt causing a stir amongst the darker-skinned Zogeki.

“Still reading that thing, Harun?”

Harun looked up, the Gunso Koharu was looking at him sceptically. The Kyoujin were a close group. It was hard to keep secrets. They knew about Arahime, way more than Harun had intended to tell them after an evening when Sayaka had passed around some kumis she

had made.

“Have I told you it’s a hopeless case?” Koharu asked. She came from a peasant background and had an extremely practical mind.

“You have, Gunso,” said Harun with a nod.

“Well, it’s clear you haven’t listened, as you’re still mooning over that Crane girl,” Koharu said. “Might as well wish for the moon itself.”

Utaku Asuna’s words came back to him. *You know it’s not going to happen, Harun...she’s Crane and she’s kuge...she’s never going to marry you...she’s going to be traded away like a sack of rice...*

“No, I think it’s romantic,” said Daidoji Akemi, smiling at Harun. “This is war, and it’s been going on longer than we’ve been alive. Sometimes I want to take a rest from cold, hard realities.” She touched the pistol that hung from a holster on her obi.

The food was ready then, Harun put the paper away. He looked around at the rest of the Kyoujin while they ate. He would go with them anywhere, and before the year was out they would be marching on Toshi Ranbo.

## Chapter 11

### **Mid Autumn, 1236 – The Unknown Lands**

She might have made it, except for the Bonedrinker.

The cut she had received when she fell after slaying it was so minor, it seemed inconsequential. It stung, certainly, but she was more troubled by the torn haori and how she would mend it than the injury itself. She could not see it of course, situated as it was under her shoulder blade. If she stretched, she could reach it, just barely, but she had no sake to pour on it or bandages to wrap herself with even if she could bind it properly. But the warmth of the tropical sky and the jade sun would heal it quickly, Arahime was certain.

It was not to be.

The day after fighting the Bonedrinker went well. She even found a fig tree, heavy in season and filled with tiny monkeys that shrieked and screamed at her as she filled her bags with the ripe, juicy fruit. She smiled at them and, amused and grateful for the bounty, thanked them for allowing her a share of the spoils. It rained in the evening again, and this time she was ready, rinsing the blood and dirt from her skin and catching the sweet waters in the remains of some of the coconut shells she had cut. She drank deeply.

But under the leaves and in the humid air, her clothes would not dry out, and she had to

sleep in them damp and cold. In the morning, the wound on her back burned and she felt thirsty and off center. When she touched it, the skin felt hot and puffy. *Stay and rest? Go on and hope for shelter?* She pushed herself on.

Her fever climbed as she forced herself through another day. The skin of her face and hands felt stretched and swollen. She drank more, but the water tasted bad. She curled up in a wide-leaved bush for a fitful sleep, too exhausted to continue. None pursued her but the terrible dreams that were beginning to creep in.

Another day. The fever did not slack, nor did the pain. She did not make it very far that day before she had to sleep again.

The next day she felt a horrible burning sensation on her back more painful than anything she had ever imagined. She could feel....**something** rooting around under her haori and jubon, under her skin. Her fingers scrambled, panicked, to reach it, even if she had no idea how to stop this horror, but she could not reach. Even if she could have, it was just as likely to make it worse. The skin was peeled back and seeping now, and when she looked at her fingertips her hand had come away filthy with blood and pus.

The thoughts moved, ephemeral, through the scattered cords of her fevered mind. *Can't stop. I can't stop here. If I stop....I'll die. I refuse.*

She tried to cut the last of her coconuts, but her strength and focus eluded her and it rolled away from her blow. She tried twice more, and, failing, gave a scream of rage and frustration. With difficulty, she resheathed her sword.

Still she stumbled on.

Images and sounds....fragments of memory....came to her unbidden. Visions of the past surrounded her, crowding close, their significance eluding her.

*Her mother weeping into her blankets, shoulders quivering with the power of her tears. Arahime's little-girl hands tug on her elbow to make her come out.*

*"Mama! Mama! What's wrong? Why are you crying?"*

*Her mother does not answer, but lays very still for a long moment. Then she sits up, face tear-streaked, but composed. She radiates the calm confidence she always seems to have, even undershadowed with grief. "My...." A pause. Time to start again. "Someone I know did a terrible, evil thing last night. She killed someone I cared for deeply." Her mother gathers her up into her arms and wraps them tightly around her. "But don't worry, Arahime-chan. She won't hurt you. I will protect you."*

Part of her, the young child that wailed frantically in her mind, longed for her mother's embrace, longed to hear those words again. *If I stop...I won't see them again. I won't see my parents again.*

Arahime stumbled onwards under the trees. Only movement and memory.

*"Faster, Papa! Faster!"*

*Her father laughs as he holds his horse on a loose lead, one hand resting gently on Arahime's leg to keep her securely in the saddle. From up here, she could reach out and touch the top of his greying, curly hair. She releases one of the reins to do so.*

*"No...hold on to the reins, Arahime-chan. You will confuse him if you let go until he's used to you. You must make friends with him first."*

*She dutifully takes back the reins. "But he likes me. See! I want to go as fast as Harun!"*

*Her father glances over to see his cousin's son already being led by his stablekeeper into a solid trot and sighed. "Maybe I'm not ready for my little Crane wildflower to grow up so quickly, Arahime-chan. I will go a little faster."*

Arahime stumbled. *I need to go faster....Father will be at Second City....he'll lead me there....* The world was a blur of greens and browns, shadowed and distorted around the edges, but offered no guides.

*Her mother comes forward, dressed in her kimonos of white trimmed with blue and Imperial jade. She hands Arahime a daisho that seems ancient. The saya is a beautiful pearl white, and the tsuba of the katana is gold with the image of a crane flying over a river scattered with cherry blossom.*

*"Your grandmother's sword," she says, a soft smile curving her lips.*

The image faded away like a ghost, replaced by another image.

*Another white-haired girl, no older than ten, with a serious face. Though so young, she already has an earthy beauty that had been compared to that of Doji Mioko. She looks up with resolute gray eyes at an older man with craggy features, graying hair bound in a topknot, sky blue hashimo and hakama stained with blood. He bears the mon of a Kenshinzen.*

*"Your grandfather's sword," the Kenshinzen says, desperately trying to mask his fear from his children though his voice cracks with grief. He hands the young girl the blade. "Keep it safe. Keep your brother and your mother safe. You, and Toshiki, you hold with you the honor of our family. Our clan. Our Empire. Serve them well."*

Another image.

*The victorious young Topaz Champion, black hair and gray eyes, unable to hold back the grin as he bows.*



*"Your grandfather's sword," says the aged Sensei, his robes marked with the Kenshinzen mon. He draws the blade and says from his own obi and hands them over. The corner of his mouth crooks upwards. "I will not be needing it any more, after all."*

Flicker....

*"Your grandfather's sword." The stiff-necked general with the Kenshinzen mon passes the blade to a young soldier.*

Flicker....

*"Your grandfather's sword." An well-dressed courtier....*

Flicker....

*"Your grandfather's sword." A grieving widow...*

Flicker....

*"Your grandfather's sword."*

Generations flickered past, warriors and poets, children and ancient, men and women...and Arahime stumbled forward. *I need to get the sword home....I promised. I promised I'd keep it safe....*

She slept at some point, then woke, and when she did, a piercing pain filled her whole left side. She found herself choking and gasping for air. She coughed, and, looking down, found blood staining the back of her sleeve where she had covered her mouth. A few coherent thoughts caught on the fever-frayed tendrils of her mind.

*I have to get to Second City....  
it could be just a few miles away....  
It could be right there....  
Harun will be waiting for me....he promised he'd come....*

A last fevered image amidst the green and growing darkness.

*He looks so handsome, wearing the armor of the Topaz Champion. Black curly hair, dark skin, brown, serious eyes looking down at her. She laughs at him to see him looking so magnificent. It is better to do that than do what she really wished. It is cheating at the game, after all, for her to tell him that he makes her heart flutter. You aren't supposed to feel that way for your classmate. You aren't supposed to feel anything but your passion for duty. Samurai.*

*But he does not laugh back. "I'm leaving, Arahime-chan. I've been given permission to go on musha shuga, to visit with my birth mother's clan. To see what I could learn of her, and of*

*my father."*

*Her laughter ends. "So quickly? I thought it would take at least a month to get your assignment..."*

*Harun shakes his head. "I want to reach Dragon lands before the armies start marching. But don't worry. I promise I will be back in time to watch your Gempukku. You are sure to win the Topaz Championship."*

*....I Promise....*

*She laughs again, but it is false. "I'll hold you to that, Harun-san....and if you don't I'll...."*

*The serious young man grins. "You'll what, Arahime-san?"*

*She opens her mouth to say something tender and hurt, then shuts it again, changing her mind. Too sweet. Better to be tart. "I'll tell you exactly what I think about you and such terrible ill manners! That's what. And that's a promise!"*

*....I Promise....*

*....I Promise....*

*Footstep follows footstep. Lips stained with blood. She can feel them in her...can feel the poison in her blood.*

*...I Promise...*

*Her fever burns. She can barely see. Too much fire...*

*...I Promise...*

*She coughs again...She can't seem to get enough air to fill her lungs. Too much air...*

*She falls to her knees, and can't find the strength to stand again. No strength left, only pain.*

*I am not going to die here.*

*My name is Kakita Arahime and I am not going to die here.*

*I am a daughter of the line of Kashiwa and I am not going to die here*

*My line is the line of a hundred generations of Kenshinzen. A line of Empresses.*

*I descend from the blood of Yasurugi and Konoshiko. I descend from the blood of Kakita and the First Men. I descend from the blood of Doji-no-kami, daughter of Heaven.*

*I am not going to die here.*

*I will not abandon the daisho of Masarugi here. I will not abandon the blades of Kaori here.*

*I will not die in some hot, filthy jungle to be eaten alive by insects.*

*I am not going to let my mother and father mourn me.*

*I am not going to let Harun, that baka, ditch me without giving him a piece of my mind.*

*I am not going to die here.*

*I am not going to die...*

*I am not...*

*I am...*

## Chapter 12

**Late Autumn, 1236 – Toshi Ranbo Guest Author Kakita Harun!**

It had been raining for three days when the message came. Three days of raids at the city walls while the mud grew deeper and thicker. Three days, and Isawa Taka said the rain would probably continue.

The day had been bad, losses to Kyoujin Platoon though the Nikutai Utaku Kenji told him not to blame himself.

He sat with a writing tablet in a corner of the tent he shared with the other Nikutai. The letters never got easier, and Harun wasn't even sure if they would get to the families of the dead. But it was important to write them, it was his responsibility to his men.

"Gunso." Utaku Kenji poked his head inside the tent. "Messenger for you, from the Champion." From his father, this could mean good news...or bad. All the same, he couldn't keep him waiting. He pulled the hood of his purple wool cloak over his head and headed out into the rain.

Soon he was on his horse, heading towards the Emerald Champion's tent. He could see the emerald green banner, flying free in the middle of the vast encampment that surrounded Toshi Ranbo. They had been laying siege to the city for three weeks and only had just begun to make an impression on

the city's defenses. Hopefully, that would change and soon, before autumn had turned to winter.

When he arrived at the tent, Kakita Karasu was talking with his second in command Akodo Ryoichi. At Harun's arrival, Ryoichi made a bow and took his leave. He gave a small smile to Harun, it looked sad and a little sympathetic. Harun had known Ryoichi most of his life, he was almost family. What did he know that Harun didn't?

Harun made a bow, as was fitting of a soldier of the Emerald Legions. But the informal way that Karasu received his bow made it clear that he hadn't sent for Harun as his commander, but as his father.

"Father, is there something wrong?" Harun asked. One of his siblings? His mother? Or was it...no, that was too terrible to think about.

"Sit down, Harun," Karasu said. He looked tired, older than his thirty-nine years.

"Is it something terrible?" Harun asked. "Is it...my mother?"

"No, no," Karasu said, shaking his head. "It's...Arahime."

Harun held his breath, he had been dreading hearing her name. Surely, nothing could have happened to her...

"She was travelling onboard ship with the Crane ambassador," Karasu said. "During the night, she fell overboard."

The words cut like a blade at Harun's heart. "But...she knows how to swim...she couldn't..."

Karasu shook his head. "Even if she did manage to swim to shore, there's no hope. She would have been torn to pieces by animals. I'm sorry."

*I'm sorry...*

*I'm sorry...*

*There's no hope...*

*There's no hope...*

The words seemed far away to Harun.

Arahime couldn't be dead. It couldn't be true.

He saw her, pushing him into a cupboard at the Academy to hide from Hayate. Proudly shouting that if they wanted to know where Harun was, they would have to fight her.

She was in the garden, beneath the blooming sakura tree, playing The Promise of Heiwa on her shamisen. A trailing pink hana kanzashi in her white hair.

She was beside him, riding her horse in the summer twilight, her long hair streaming behind her as she urged her horse into a gallop. Taking off and yelling for Harun to hurry up.

Arahime couldn't be dead. How was it possibly so when she was so full of life?

Karasu's hand touched his shoulder gently, like a father comforting a child. And like a child, Harun sought reassurance in his face. A denial, that it was all a terrible mistake.

But there was none, only truth.

Harun fell to his knees, a low moan escaping his lips. Tears flowed down his cheeks, his hands pulled at his beard, his hair. He wanted to feel pain, anything to deaden the pain he felt inside.

Karasu grabbed his hands. His voice was cold, and harsher than Harun had ever heard him. "Harun, we will find who did this and make them pay. The Crane have sworn."

"Send me, father," Harun pleaded. "Let my blade avenge Arahime's death. Send me!"

Karasu shook his head. "No," he said. "I know you want to; I know your heart burns with the rage of vengeance. But that is not your place, my son."

Harun bowed his head, letting his tears flow freely. Each one a reproach on himself for never speaking to her, for never telling how he felt. How he loved her, that she completed him, how he was lost without her. There were not enough tears, not nearly enough.

It was evening when he returned to camp. Kenji, seeing him riding in, made sure that everyone kept their distance as Harun went to the tent. His grief was soon lost in the nothingness of sleep.

The next morning when he awoke, his eyes were swollen from crying, his mood grey and lifeless. But still, he dressed, still donned his armour. Still, he mounted his horse and went into battle with his men.

The morning after his father Nakura had been killed, his mother Yamada still got her sword and fought beside Karasu in battle. Still went before the Emperor and petitioned to have Karasu made Emerald Champion. There were still battles to fight, she had said. There were always battles to fight, Harun knew, and this was his duty.

## Chapter 13

### *Winter, 1236 – The Unknown Lands*

"You should not have done this thing."

"I know." The foolish old man hung his head in shame as he laid the last sacred stone into the circle

on the dusty floor.

“You risk your own dharma to even remain near one who walks the path of violence and death.” The guru reached out with his crooked staff and touched the stone circle. A spiral of light and heat spun around the stones and curled in towards the middle.

“I know.” The old man gathered fistfuls of flowers and leaves from the hundreds that filled every part of the rude tree-bound hut. He threw them onto the stones. “I had no choice.” A plume of grey smoke swirled upwards, filling the air with a sweet and exotic scent. “That is why I have asked you to come.”

The guru spread a broad hand, palm down, over the smoke. He recited a prayer, the ancient sutra of creation. The smoke shifted color from grey to a pure white. “There is always choice. Tell me why you have done this thing. Only then may I truly be able to advise you where the path of good dharma lies.” He sat, lay his staff across his lap, and looked at the old man expectantly.

The old man glanced over at the silent corner of the room. He crouched down on the ground across from his teacher, the smoke rising between them. With a sigh, he began his tale.

“I listened to the trees and found the forest was greatly disturbed. The greatest story I heard was that the Bonedrinker was dead. I know to feel gratitude for this is to imperil my hopes for Svargam. But the Bonedrinker is no natural creature. It burns with the eternal hunger and has caused much violence for the last century. It preys on our kind. I felt gratitude to think that such a demon might be returned to the wheel. But I needed to know this truth for myself.

In the lands of the Bonedrinker, I found it was true. The eaters of the dead had come, but there was no mistaking. I did not go near. Satisfied, I turned towards home. As I journeyed, I saw before me a fan of white spread across the forest floor, concealed by leaves. I thought it was a great egret, most beautiful of the birds of the jungle. I mourned its passing. But then it moved slightly. I immediately thought it must be hurt. For the sake of its beauty and majesty, I resolved to show it compassion and bring it healing, that it might bring further joy and beauty to the forest. I hurried to give it aid. It was not until I reached its side that I realized it was no egret. It was this.”

The foolish old man gestured to the corner of the room. There lay, under a covering of brown cloth woven of simple plant fiber, the unconscious body of a young woman. Her white hair spilled around her and her tanned skin held the sickly pallor of death. “I had already resolved to act in compassion. To refuse to render that compassion when I saw its true nature would be to render a violence upon it based on its place on the wheel. I had no choice.”

The guru nodded thoughtfully, scratching his hairy stomach in thought as he listened to the old man’s words. “Perhaps. But the provisions of compassion do not compel us to aid the cannibal. It is their nature to feast upon their own. We are to avoid them lest we be tempted into violence to save our own lives. Their spirits have become corrupted with the eating of flesh. We pray for their swift return to the wheel.”

The white smoke swirled around the foolish old man as he answered and started to disperse as the

plants turned to ash. "I thought the same, Ou'bouji. I too have silently watched them from the shadows. But I smell its skin. I see the stains of its past. This one has tasted no hot blood, only that of the cold fish and insect, much as the egret itself. If I did not condemn the egret, I could not condemn this one. I had no choice but to bring it here and care for it, as I had originally agreed within my own spirit. Viveka, the path of discernment, demanded it."

"Humm." Ou'bouji shifted heavily to his feet. "I can see the difficulty. What of the knife, Yu'genta? The knives are their instruments of destruction. They tell the fuller story." He leaned on his staff and removed the gourd from the end of it.

The old man, Yu'genta, gestured with a broad hairy hand to the opposite corner of the hut, where, discarded like a couple of abandoned sticks, were a pair of blades. Each were in a shiny and glistening sheath, like a pair of fish.

"Their fates are bound together. Knife and human. I had to bring them."

Ou'bouji made a low rumbling noise of distaste. "You risk being made Shojo for even touching this. Such things are not of the Vānara."

The old man tilted his head and looked at the Guru with a lack of understanding. "We take and protect many such things when we find them. Hide them. They are not ours to destroy, but we keep them from being used."

Ou'bouji paused, then slowly nodded. "You are right. I spoke too hastily. It is the one who wields the tool that does evil, not the tool itself. Even tools to cause great violence. Still..." He slowly approached the pair of swords, picking one up, then the other, smelling them with a flattened nose. "There is a history of violence, it is true. But the only blood I smell within the last quarter century is..." he sniffed again, "...that of...the Bonedrinker?" He dropped the sword with a clatter. "So that is why."

Yu'genta nodded. "Yes. Not only had I already chosen compassion, but the violence done saves the lives of our people. So I brought it here. I cast it into the deep sleep, for its wounds caused pain beyond bearing. I lowered the fever and drew forth the flies. I cleansed the blood and bound the wounds. But it will be months before it can travel. The lung will never heal or function again. "

The old man, Yu'genta, hung his head. "I do not know the right action to take. It is a creature of violence and madness. If I awaken it, it likely to do violence to me. And if not me, to others. As the scorpion knows only its sting, its nature exists only in violence." He pressed his knuckles against the ground as he swung to his feet. "I am willing to take the burden of keeping it asleep, here, for the rest of its life. It will only live fifty or sixty monsoons longer. If it sleeps, it can do no more violence."

The guru, Ou'bouji, turned and approached the fire again, unstopping the gourd. "That is worthy. But to do so would prevent it from completing the dharma it was sent in this form to accomplish. Before the summoning of the great Destruction, the Vānara helped the holiest, those who tried to follow the path of Brahmin. These can grow towards enlightenment in this form, even in a limited way. If there was more this one was meant to complete before it is returned to the wheel, that would

not be achieved. It could not progress to a higher life.” He sprinkled droplets of liquid from the gourd onto the glowing circle. New smoke arose, this time a pale blue.

“Yes, Guru Ou’bouji. What is your recommendation?” The old man of the woods, his once orange hair now almost gray with age, crouched down before his honored guide.

Ou’bouji, his broad gray face troubled at the deep questions, looked down at the sacred stones. “Your actions have been worthy, and you have shown no temptation to fall into human vice in this. To let it stay sleeping would be kind and easy and safe. But courage too is a virtue. If it launches into violence, I will support you and show you how to quickly return it to lifelong sleep. If it does not, then it may earn its dharma here, far from the ways of violence. You may be destined to teach it. Or it may leave and let the violence of the jungle guide its path to the end its futures hold. ”

Yu’genta knuckled his forehead in agreement. It would be awakened.

The heavy, pungent smell of eucalyptus filled the air. The sound of drumming shook the floor and walls of the hut. Ou’bouji held up his staff, ready to unleash the power of dreams to protect them both from the creature’s wrath. But Yu’genta shook a rattle over the sleeping form and chanted the Sutra of the Dawn.

For a few minutes, it seemed like nothing would happen. That the dreams that held this one and kept it from pain would never release it.

But as the smoke cleared and a shaft of sunlight fell upon its face, this white-haired creature, born to a legacy and a destiny of violence, opened her stormy gray eyes.

## Chapter 14

### ***Winter, 1236 – The Unknown Lands***

For nine days, she only watched him. In her waking hours, those strange gray eyes followed him around the room as he prepared food or ground medicines. He could feel her eyes on him as he meditated, as he slept. She watched him look into the waters and sing the sutras. But she did not say a word.

Yu’genta at first feared she would spring from her bed to attack him at any moment, though he was not sure she was well enough to do much harm. He knew she suffered pain despite his medicines, and after so long asleep she would have had great weakness. Still, many creatures attack even those who are trying to heal them in the face of pain. It is difficult to adjust to so much stripped from the body. But she did not attack, even when he came to change the bandages. Much of the time, she slept. Any pain she had, she suffered in silence. He allowed himself to grow slightly more comfortable in her presence, but continued to be wary. *She is probably just too weak to dare*, he thought.

On the tenth day, as he crouched by her and lifted a spoon of broth to her lips, she spoke a word-sound for the first time. Her voice was hoarse and dusky with misuse. He merely grunted in response.



*Perhaps the word for food. No matter..* She made the same sound again later in the evening when he brought mashed breadfruit mixed with juice to feed her. *Though...perhaps there is more. Guru Ou'bouji spoke of me teaching her.* He scowled. *He would say I should teach a tiger next, I suppose. I must have much dharma I must earn before I reach the end of my years if that is my future.*

Still, this sound she made was interesting. She used it the next day when he brought her a meal, as he expected, but then surprised him by making the same sound after he had finished binding her wounds again, despite flinching and what was clearly an unpleasurable experience. *Why would she make this sound both for receiving food and for having bandages changed?* He tried to offer her a scoopful of dung, but she did not make the sound, instead recoiling from him. Yu'genta came to realize in a few days she made the sound whenever she received something beneficial, even if that benefit involved immediate pain for her long term good.

One morning, he found the most beautiful of the healing flowers he had gathered and presented it to her, carefully looking for her response. *It serves no benefit to her. What will she do?* His patient paused as she accepted it, looking down in the delicate, curving purple depths of the lovely orchid. Then she looked up at him, and he could see the glimmer of actual tears on the corners of her eyes. She made the sound again.

It gave him much to think about that night. *I do not know what the sound means. But perhaps Ou'bouji is right. Maybe there is a chance she actually has a soul.*

Yu'genta continued his work, and he was beginning to grow concerned. Although her body seemed to be healing, and he was fairly sure she was past the pain, she was starting to eat less and sleep more, making little effort to rise. This confused him. He would expect her to try to slink away as quickly as possible, or, if more intelligent than that, to try to shore up her strength to prepare for a more powerful attack. But she seemed to grow less inclined to do either. He touched the waters to send a message out to Ou'bouji to ask why that might be.

***"Show her the knives."*** came back the response.

He did so, picking up the pair of weapons from their discarded corner, and, with great caution, bringing them to her. She lifted her head at that, and her eyes widened. Yu'genta jumped back, ready with the chant that invokes sleeping. But she merely took them and said those words again before lying back down in exhaustion. The creature... *The Human*, he corrected himself...seemed to do somewhat better after that.

In the days that followed, ate and drank a little more and was slowly growing in strength, growing able to feed herself and move within the confines her sleeping pallet. One afternoon, as the winter sunshine slit down into the hut through the leaves of the roof, she looked at the cup from which she was drinking, and the flowers near her bed that he had brought for her healing. She tilted her head to one side thoughtfully, and then took three different kinds of the flowers around her and arranged

them in the water cup, trimming the ends and leaves to make sure they were arranged 'just so'.

Yu'genta found himself curious, and swung over to land beside her, looking at the cup with the flowers. *What is her intention with this?* he wondered.

The human held the cup with flowers out to him. He eyed it carefully up and down. *Humph. The shoji would know what this was. But it is....sacred. In a way.* He accepted the cup from her. And, almost as a test of his own understanding, he grunted out his best imitation of the sound that she had been making. "Ari-ga-tō."

She did not repeat the sound this time, but she just silently put her hands together and gave him a small bow.

Yu'genta put the cup on a shelf in the hut, and noticed her watching it often.

After that, she began to make a variety of different sounds, but Yu'genta mostly ignored them. He expected screaming and threats, as is. No need to encourage it. It was annoying enough that she was there. "Teaching or not, speaking with corrupted souls will corrupt your own." He found it more pleasant when she was silent.

The human was getting stronger. One day while he was sitting on the floor of his hut weaving baskets, she pointed to the pile of rushes next to him. "Hachimitsu kudasai?" The sounds meant nothing to him, but she pointed at the rushes and then pointed at herself, a pleading expression on her face.

*Is she asking for the rushes? Why?* He ignored her for a while, but she made the same sound again. *This is too difficult!* the old man grouched to himself. He pointed at the reeds.

She pointed at them also. "Hachimitsu."

He grumbled to himself, then repeated, "Hachimitsu."

She nodded at him eagerly.

"Hachimitsu kudasai?" She pointed at the reeds and back at herself.

The old man snorted loudly. "Fine! Let's see what you do with them. They aren't food. Or flowers."

He gathered up a bundle of reeds and brought it to her.

"Arigato," she repeated, as she usually did when given something, and accepted the reeds. He grunted and returned to his basket making. After a time, he looked up to notice her watching him, copying his motions, slowly weaving a basket of reeds similar to his. It was a poor, simple thing, but it left him with a thousand questions.

*Was she actually building something? Was she even trying to /help/ him? Was she learning from him?* He brought her more reeds, and she continued to try to weave, fingers clearly unused to the work. But she slowly worked on finer baskets, even alternating color and design. That had even broader implications. *Is she actually creating beauty? Was that not the hallmark of a soul?*

The days passed. With time, she was able to rise. Yu'genta expected her to leave, then, weak and unsteady as she was, knowing that most creatures could not bear to be caged. He hoped for it, really...an excuse to return to his solitary life. She disturbed his serenity.

She did not go.

The human did, however, start changing the Vānara's small world in ways that confused him. It started with trying to weave baskets or helping him to prepare food before she could walk again. One day, she cut a hole into the center of the fiber cloth he used to cover her for warmth. With more time, she started to do simple things inside the hut like remove the dead flowers or grind medicines. She would place the blanket over her body and move in the hut, especially when he was not present. He would leave and find the place cleaner when he returned. Or find a meal prepared where there had been none. Sometimes, the effort of it was enough to send her back to her bed in exhaustion. But then she would begin again.

It was not behavior that Yu'genta expected. But he slowly came to accept it.

One day, he returned from gathering in the forest to find a meal prepared. After he had eaten, he looked up to see her kneeling before him, wrapped in the plant fibers from her bed. She bowed, looking down at the floor. He could see the glimmer of pride, of wildness, that intimidated him, but her manner was humble.. She said only, "Kiru fuku kudasai?"

*"Kudasai."* The sound she had made when asking for the reeds. She had made that sound asking for other things. What does she want? He grunted. Then he reached over with a foot and grabbed a fruit that was near him, and offered it up to her.

She shook her head. "Fuku..." She gestured to the blanket around her. "'Kiru fuku kudasai?"

Yu'genta scowled, trying to figure out what she was wanting, when suddenly he remembered. When he had found her, she had been wrapped in filthy pieces of cloth. They were wet and covered with insects, blood, and filth. He had had to destroy them. He had none to give her. He reached forward to pluck at the plant fiber and made a non-committal sound of inquiry.

She nodded eagerly, gesturing at the cloth. "Hai!"

He offered her the fruit again. She shook her head and made the sound "Īe." Her face showed disappointment.

*Humph. The nod and the 'Hai' must mean Yes, the old man thought. And shaking the head and 'Īe' must mean No. It probably is not that great a danger to me to learn that much. I shall ask Ou'bouji. But as to the cloth...*

The next day, he went out into the forest and brought back sheets of coconut fiber for another blanket and set to work. She watched him as he made it with a sigh, looking disappointed. He thought, again, about her attacking him, but she did not do so. When he was finished, he presented her with the finished blanket.

"Arigatōgozaimashita," she said, taking the blanket and curling up with it to go to sleep. But she didn't seem pleased.

That evening, he touched the waters again, reaching out to the Guru.

Ou'bouji's broad gray face gazed calmly back at him through the waters. "**May the light of holiness guide you, Yu'genta. How are you and the one you have placed under your charge?**" He may have sounded a little amused.

"She greatly troubles my serenity. She does not do as I expect. She is well enough to move now, though weak. But she has not attacked me at all. Instead she weaves baskets and prepares food and wipes away dirt and grinds medicine."

The guru scratched the broad rim of dark flesh that protected his throat, a sign of his caste. "**Has she asked for anything from you?**"

The old man of the forest sniffed. "She makes sounds. I ignore them. You yourself have said is dangerous to listen to such violent creatures. She sometimes indicates she wants reeds for basket making. She seems to want a new cloth covering. Perhaps as she had when I found her? I gave her a new blanket but she does not seem happy."

The guru considered this closely. "**I have spoken to you before of the ancient times. I should have been more clear. Since the summoning of the great Destruction, the Vanaprastha have known only two kinds of humans that remain. The first are the Ruhmalists, who drew forth the great Destruction and live only for the creation and proliferation of destruction. The second are the ones known as Samurai, with their narrow eyes and their love of their knives. This one looks like neither, but it had the knives. So, as you did, I believed it was Samurai.**"

Yu'genta listened carefully to the teacher's wisdom.

Ou'bouji went on. "**The Vanaprastha, as all Vānara who seek Svargam do, have avoided the Samurai. But we know some amount about them. They consume the flesh of their kin, Brother Goat and Sister Deer. They hunt the messengers of the heavens, the birds of the air. This causes the corruption of the body. They create and offer sake, which causes the corruption of**

***the mind. Vānara which fall prey to this corruption become shojo, at the mercy of their basest instincts. Even the Vanapasthra and the seers can fall victim to their corruption; to lose En'you was a great tragedy. We know they train incessantly for war, and are quick to use their knives against any that do not do as they will or do not treat them carefully.***

Yu'genta rumbled, "I have watched them move through the forest. They are dangerous. That is why I keep silent."

The image of Ou'bouji reached towards him through the water, appearing to touch the water's surface. As he did so, an image became visible in the waters: an image of a group of samurai bearing the symbols of spiders on their black and white metal shells, cutting a swath of destruction through the jungles. ***"They are dangerous. And cunning...willing to lie and deceive to get what they wish. They have, according to those who know them best, only one virtue: utter loyalty and obedience to the one who leads them. But, in that loyalty, they have the seeds of virtue from which other virtues may spring. Perhaps even the beginning of a soul."***

The old man glanced back at the bed upon which the young woman slept. "This one...seems to want to help. When I refused her, she did not attack. She tries to make beautiful things, though it is clear she has no skill. That is why I thought she might have a soul."

The image in the water cleared. It was replaced with another image, an image of a simple Ivinda farmer. Ou'bouji's voice said over the seeing, ***"Before the summoning of the great destruction, there were many humans indeed. Most were of these, Ivinda. They have their equivalent among the aliens who have come to this land. For either, they do not seek enlightenment or purity. They earn their dharma in simple lives. They do not have the touch of Heaven upon them. The Vānara acknowledged them long ago, though did not communicate with them much. They usually hide from us. They are much given to their vices, even if they avoided violence, and caused some of the weakness of the shojo. But they are never allowed to carry the blades. The Samurai and higher castes forbid it."***

Yu'genta just grunted. His lost egret did not seem to him a laborer. A laborer does not carry the knives of a killer. And those not touched by the heavens would not carry the blessings of the kingdom of animals upon them.

Ou'bouji's face reappeared in the water. ***"Before the great destruction, however, there were some among the Ivinda who the Vanaprastha did meet with. Those we could trust to treat us with courtesy and to keep their word to us. Those who sought the Way and led their people. The Vanaprastha came to them to create treaties. To teach them...to help them guide the humans on the path to freedom from the wheel of incarnation. Sometimes, even the Sannyasin would commune with them, they who are almost all removed from the world. These humans were the Brahmin of the Ivinda. They were holy." The guru's eyes were dark and intense. "Perhaps, among the Samurai, as among the Ivinda, there are Brahmin. Or at least, perhaps she is samurai who has been endowed with virtue despite her caste. Perhaps she has been sent to guide her kind on the path. Perhaps that explains what she is."***

"If she were Brahmin, or had virtue above her caste, how would we know?" Yu'genta's could see the

intensity in the guru's expression, and feared he had done something wrong in the way he had dealt with the human in his care.

Ou'bouji's small brown eyes gleamed with curiosity. ***"I will come in one turning of the moon. We shall test her. If she passes the tests, then we shall know if she is Brahmin. If she is Brahmin...then we shall speak. And we shall understand one another truly. If she is not Brahmin, I will bring her cloth wrappings the Samurai wear and she shall go. She will be well enough by then. The forest will finish her destiny for this lifetime."***

## Chapter 15

### ***Winter Court, 1236 – Kyuden Hida***

Harun awoke with a gasp, sitting up on his futon and feeling the cold sweat clinging to his face and body. The grim stone walls of Kyuden Hida offered no response or consolation. They had watched over the nightmares of samurai for generations, and Harun's were minor compared to the horrors they had beheld. But the bushi's dreams still had claws buried in his mind that refused to let him go. He sank his head into his hands with a groan.

*So real.* Even awake, with his eyes open, he could see before him the corpse-littered streets of Toshi Ranbo. Bright colors and brave banners spoiled in thick gray mud. There were places where the bodies of the dead themselves formed the walls that needed to be torn down to get further into the city. To rout out Yuhmi's commanders, to try to get to the demon himself.

That had been in vain. The oni had fled already.

But that did not mean he had not left 'surprises' for those coming after him. *Koharu. Sayaka.* Harun had forced them through regardless. This was war. There was no choice but victory. There was nothing else left. *Arahime.*

When the Imperial Legionnaire had come upon that slaughtered unit of Mirumoto bushi...heard that taunting laughter....*I did what I needed to do. I ended it.* If he told himself that often enough, would that make it true?

*The bodies. His hand on the tsuka of his katana. A drift of ash. The burst of sound. White hair, kabuki paint, black blood trickling from the corner of a mouth still laughing insanely as he died.*

Saying it again would never make it true for his father. Harun had seen so many different roles that Kakita Karasu had filled in his life. The laughing father who swung him around so fast as a little boy. The patient teacher who carefully instructed him in the lessons he would need to win entry into the Kakita Academy. The brilliant duelist who danced the sword with pure focus and control. The lonely husband who watched his wife depart, once again, on paths unknown, wrapped in a cheap saffron robe and head covered with a basket so that she would travel as nameless monk. Judicious general, listening to the plans of his strategists and deciding how to deploy the Imperial Legions. And as Emerald Champion, declaring the sentence and weight of the law. Declaring someone's execution. In all those roles, Harun had never seen him as angry as he was after Toshi Ranbo.

*After his victory.*  
*After his disgrace.*

Harun held his aching head, fingers combing through his curly black hair. There were only a few hours left until dawn. Dawn meant another day of winter court. Another day of watching the Emperor, distant as the moon, aloft on his cold stone pedestal. Another day where the Chosen looked down silently at the war-weary eyes of the Emperor's court full of pleading petitioners. A court in waiting, holding its breath. For something. An end. A world to be reborn. Anything. A future.

But there was no future for him. Not anymore.

The ocean claimed his future two months ago.

Now there were only nightmares.

## Chapter 16

### ***Winter, 1236 – The Unknown Lands***

While Yu'genta waited for Ou'bouji's arrival, he watched the human he had found in the jungle grow healthier each day. She used the small blade from the knife to cut a strip from her second blanket, tying the first around herself in a crude mimicry of the outer layer he had originally destroyed. Once that was accomplished, she moved freely about the hut as she willed, though she returned to her bed frequently for rest and for him to teach her how to care for her own wounds.

Finally, around the time the time when they days became their shortest, she was able to leave his tree hut and climb down. He led her into the jungle, and tears glimmered in her eyes as she breathed the freedom of her escape. She did not flee. He led her to the clear-running cool jungle stream from which he drew his water. When she threw off her cloth wrapping and jumped into the waters, he could not help but remember the youngest of the Vānara, born so many years ago. How long had it been since there had been a child among his people? Even if he should be cautious about this being, he had to smile to see her, not too much more than a child, enjoying the freedom and the waters as she washed herself.

He had to spend extra time caring for her wound that night, but she made the 'Arigato' sound. He found himself beginning to regret that he would not be ever able to heal the wound fully. Some wounds are even beyond the skill of the Vānara.

After that day, she did spend time helping him in his hut, but each day, she would make the climb down to the ground and begin to dance. Yu'genta watched her carefully from a perch on an upper branch. At first her dancing was done with empty hands, moving back and forth across the jungle floor beside his home. The motion was fluid and beautiful.

It was disturbing, then, when she took up her knife. He kept well away from her, always aware of the edge of madness, but she simply did the same dances over again, this time with the naked steel in her hands. There was violence and death in those moves, and it took all his courage to remain watching.

But he could not deny that the same beauty that had been in the dance without the steel was in this dance with it. *Could beauty and violence subsist together? A strange step indeed on the path of dharma. Perhaps the unification of such principles is a necessary step along the path towards liberation from the wheel.*

Time passed. Yu'genta finally met with Ou'bouji far from his hut while he was out foraging.

"This is the first test. Give to her these, and see what she does with them. The Brahmin passed wisdom across generations with these." The guru gave Yu'genta a number of pieces of paper. The old man had seen them at times before: when he had travelled on pilgrimage to the holy places as a young man, long ago. There, they recorded the sacred scriptures, with drawings and paintings that showed the images of the gods.

When Yu'genta had returned to the hut, he found that the human had boiled water in an empty gourd using a heated stone, and had made a tea by boiling leaves. She poured out for him a cup. In return, he gave her the paper with a grunt.

She smiled and made the 'Arigato' sound again. As he drank the tea, he watched her. After some time, she decided take the first piece of paper and carefully fold it, bending and folding it over and over into a small five-sided shape. She looked at him, and pulled on two parts of the folded shape, which pulled open like a flower. With two more folds, she held it on her hand and offered it to him. It was an egret, a bird made out of paper with a long neck and long wings, looking as though it had settled into her hand to nest.

The other sheets she set aside. After he had finished his tea, she found a stick and laid it upon the hot stones until it was well charred. In her empty cup, she combined the ashes with a little water, and then found a green twig. She stripped away part of the pith of the twig at one end, leaving only a curl of the green bark. Using the twig and the ashen water, she began to make marks upon the paper. The marks were alien to him. But the human's expression was focused and serious; unlike the creation of the egret, this was no casual craft or play. When she was done, she laid the paper aside. She laid her hand on the paper she had marked when he tried to move it, and since it was bad dharma to take anything that had not been offered, he let it be.

Yu'genta left to report the results to his guru, bringing with him the paper bird he had been given.

Ou'bouji examined the bird carefully and listened to the old man's description of the marks on the paper. "She has writing then, even if we do not know the tongue. And she can clearly create beauty for beauty's own sake." He held up the bird. "We are ready for the second test."

Yu'genta had left as normal for his daily foraging, but on this day he found a perch high in a tree overlooking his own hut and the jungle floor around. As usual, the human arose and came down to do her dancing with the sword. However, things today would be different.



A chilling, panicked cry emerged from undergrowth near where the human danced. She stopped, sheathed her blade, and looked around for the source of the sound. Then, breathing rapidly and painfully, she turned and went towards the sound, pushing aside the heavy bushes. There, Ou'bouji was ready, his staff in hand, cowering away from what appeared to be an enormous spider, at least the height of a man. The spider bore in on the guru aggressively. Yu'genta, even knowing the plan, could hardly bear to look. Would the human turn aside, seeing nothing to be gained here? Would she wait until the spider had attacked Ou'bouji for the full glory of bloodshed without risk? Or...

The human came running, sweeping up a rock and hurling it at the giant spider's carapace and shouting as she came.

The giant spider whirled and charged towards the human, huge, hairy, and venomous. But the human held her ground, hand on the handle of the knife but not drawing it, as she waited for the spider to close and attack her. Yu'genta was surprised that the human was able to face such a creature unarmed, without even flinching.

At the last moment the spider turned aside and charged into the forest, disappearing.

Perhaps the sound faded a little too swiftly, for Yu'genta knew that the whole thing had been an illusion prepared by Ou'bouji, though the illusion was so realistic it had seemed real even to fellow Vānara. Illusion gone, he climbed down from his perch and moved towards the human. She was pale and her breath labored. She made some sounds, and pointed up towards the hut.

Ou'bouji then spoke. It was in a tongue that Yu'genti did not understand...but it was clear the human did. The guru translated his words for the old Vānara.

"Yes. We go to hut. Hide from Spider. **Arigato**...Thank you."

*Oh, so that's what it meant.*

Ou'bouji led the way to Yu'genti's hut in the tree, and the human insisted on coming last. The spider, naturally, did not follow. It had never existed at all.

On reaching the treehouse herself, she bowed to Ou'bouji and a flood of words came out of her mouth at once despite her breathlessness. The guru held up his hand. "Slow." He put the banana-leaf wrapped bundle he carried down to one side and settled into a squat at the circle of stones, and the young female nodded and knelt across from him. Yu'genta sat nearby, watching them as the guru kindly translated both her words and his.

The guru pointed at himself. "Me Ou'bouji." He pointed over at the old man. "He Yu'genta." He pointed at the human. "Who you?"

The human pointed at herself. "I am Kakita Arahime."

The guru nodded. "You samurai?"

The human...Kakita Arahime...answered, "Yes."

Yu'genta bared his teeth, but Ou'bouji stopped him with a glance, saying quickly in their own tongue, "There is more that we don't understand. We should not draw conclusions yet."

Ou'bouji turned back and spoke again in the girl's tongue. "Why you here?"

Arahime look down, as though trying to find the right words. "Another samurai threw me from the ship we were travelling on. He wanted me to die. I swam to shore. I got hurt. I woke up here."

The words were difficult to translate, and it took Ou'bouji several attempts to get them right. Once it became clear violence that had been done to her, Yu'genta hooted his anger, but Ou'bouji showed more control.

Before he could ask another question, however, the girl turned to Yu'genta and said, slowly and clearly, for Ou'bouji to translate, "Thank you for saving me."

Yu'genta was pleased and settled back with satisfaction.

Ou'bouji leaned forward to look intently at the samurai. "What you want most now?"

Ferver brightened her eyes and she lean forward intently. "Please take me back to Second City. Please help me go home."

"No!" Ou'bouji's voice changed tone dramatically, becoming loud and authoritative, ending with a boom. He held his staff in front of him, awaiting the attack that might come.

Yu'genta almost pitied the samurai when he saw the expression of hurt in her eyes as she drew back. Her eagerness and happiness at being able to communicate disappeared and she seemed to draw in on herself. She was silent for a long time. Finally, tentatively, she asked, "Do you know where it is?"

Ou'bouji's tone was even sterner in response. "Yes."

Arahime was still quiet, still controlled. "Will you tell me how to get there by myself?"

The brown-eyed Vānara searched intently in the human's eyes for traces of violence as he answered, "No."

*She will definitely attack now. She will try to force him to tell.* Yu'genta's thoughts were dark. Together, the two Vānara waited for some kind of response. Any response.

The human knelt there, watching them both for a very long time. The only sound in the hut was the sound of her pained breathing. Finally, she said, in a soft tone. "Could you at least tell my family I am not dead, please?"

The guru said nothing, just looking at her silently. She tried to ask several more times, but neither of the Vānara said anything in response. In the end, she turned and withdrew to her sleeping mat. She lay down, pulled the blanket over her and went to sleep.

Yu'genta turned to Ou'bouji long after she had gone to sleep. "Well? How do you judge?"

Ou'bouji watched the sleeping form. "Remarkable." He turned to face the old man. "I have no doubts, now. Despite her words, she must be Brahmin." He ticked off on his fingers the results of the tests.

"She had already shown in her interactions with you the virtues of bodily purity, humility, and courtesy. "In the first test, when given paper, she used it to create both beauty and write words, showing herself above the laborer caste and indicating that she likely has a soul. There is no requirement that we understand the words for them to be knowledge shared in this fashion. These show values of scholarship, knowledge, and beauty.

"For the second test, in the face of danger to a stranger, to Vānara, she went to the aid the other even at risk of her own life. And yet, she did not threaten violence by drawing her weapon even after she had called the wrath of the enemy upon herself. She saw to the safety of the other before her own. Courage, sacrifice, and restraint.

"And for the third test, you see. She did not respond to denial of the desired with violence, threats, or complaint. She asks to send word to her family...it honors her elders. I do not think that a normal Samurai could have responded thus. She must be Samurai-Brahmin."

Yu'genta, for the first time, did not feel so foolish for taking in this fallen bird he had found in the forests. Perhaps there were things they could learn from each other. "What will we do now? Will we help her?"

Ou'bouji opened his mouth in a broad-toothed smile. "Yes, indeed, Yu'genta my friend. There is much we must speak of. If she desires to know us, we will guide her. And we will grant her what her heart hopes for."

## Chapter 17

### ***Winter Court, 1236 – Kyuden Hida***

The winter wind whipped the battlements of Kyuden Hida, but the stoic Crab guards ignored it. To Harun, it always seemed that there was a taste of ash on the wind, despite the chill air and lack of fire. Maybe it was the grit carried over the Shadowlands Waste. Maybe it was just a memory written into the very air. But at least it was outside, a place he could see the sky. On the southern horizon, the true strength of the Great Wall dwarfed all things before it. But there was always the wintery blue sky and the sleeping rice paddies. There was always the sea.

He was not the only one who had stepped out. A pair of Hiruma scouts, at least by the look of their

light armor and mons, emerged from the steps onto the battlements only a few moments after he did. Harun gave them a nod to acknowledge their arrival, and one elbowed the other in the ribs and whispered something quietly. After some brief words were exchanged, they approached.

“Good afternoon, Kakita-sama,” the first said. “Congratulations on your part in the great Victory at Toshi Ranbo.”

Harun gave a non-committal hmmm and nodded an acknowledgement. *Please go away. Please...just leave.*

The second stepped closer. “We were wondering if you could tell us....”

“Pardon me.” A third figure dressed in elegant black court robes stepped up behind the pair of scouts and coughed to alert them of his presence. They both turned quickly away and their eyes widened. They bowed quickly.

A second later, Harun bowed equally deeply. “Lord Shibatsu.”

The daimyo of the Emerald Spider was an older man now, nearing retirement. The years had turned his black hair gray, put wrinkles into the corners of his eyes. His raiment was formal, but his smile was casual. With a gesture, he shooed off the Hiruma. “Friends, A moment to speak to the son of the Emerald Champion alone.”

Much to the Imperial Legionnaire’s relief, the Crab quickly retreated. A flick of the Susumu’s fan made it clear that Harun was expected to follow. He did so.

Shibatsu strolled casually along the battlements, apparently enjoying the view. He said nothing as they travelled towards the south wall. There, the brutal truth of Kaiu Kabe laid out before them, he spoke.

“The Crab bushi are quite interested in your accomplishments in Toshi Ranbo, Kakita Harun. You seem to have made an impression.”

*Toshi Ranbo.* “I did what I had to do, My Lord. I do not take pride in it.” Harun forced his voice to stay even.

“You removed quite the long-term embarrassment, both to your clan and to the Iweko, from what I have heard. You did as we all must,” answered Shibatsu, his black fan flickering as he gestured over at the Great Wall.

*He’s comparing my actions to what the Crab do,* Harun realized. He wasn’t entirely sure If it was an insult or a compliment.

Shibatsu swiftly changed subjects. “I find dealing with the Crab has historically been tedious. Their valor and sacrifice is of course worthy of praise and reward. And yet their disdain for honor and right behavior stymies the effort to reward them. To do so would make it seem that their disdain itself is

being rewarded. Don't you think?"

Harun blinked, uncertain at the sudden change in direction. "I...do not consider myself In a good position to judge."

The Spider waved his fan dismissively at the Kakita mon emblazoned on Harun's kimono. "Perhaps not yourself, but is it not the Crane's duty to judge what is and is not worthy? To develop and advance the culture of the Empire?"

The Crane bushi suddenly felt very small, wishing he was somewhere else entirely. He could feel his father's anger again. "I suppose." It was all he could do not to mumble.

Shibatsu smiled, ignoring with good humor Harun's obvious discomfort. "Well. The Crane and the Crab have their duties. My duties offer me a certain...latitude...in rewarding those who are worthy of reward, even if proper face requires their deeds be rightly condemned."

Harun's dark eyes were troubled, trying to figure out what Shibatsu seemed to be offering. He was about to say something when Shibatsu made a quick gesture with his fan.

"I do hope you find your assignment to Seawatch Castle pleasant, Harun-san. The ocean can be beautiful in the spring. But if you find your time there taxing, or if there is anything else that you might wish for, please do not hesitate to write to me. Some duties are a pleasure."

*Seawatch Castle?* Harun inwardly groaned. *Is that where my father has found to put me for my punishment?* He knew that, in many ways, he deserved the assignment. But he could think of nothing that he could want from the Lord of the Spider. "I am very grateful, Lord Shibatsu. " He bowed low. "I will obey my father's orders gladly, if that is where he sends me. But I am grateful for the kindness of your offer anyway."

Susumu Shibatsu tucked his fan into his obi, looking as though this was the answer he expected. "Another day then. For now...I think I shall go get some kave. Enjoy the view, Chui."

He turned back the way he came, leaving Harun on his own to realize they had reached the Eastern Wall. He gazed eastwards towards the shoreline and the greedy gray sea.

## Chapter 18

### ***Spring, 1237 – The Unknown Lands***

Her first thought, even before she opened her eyes, was disbelief that she was actually still alive. The pieces of her memory were broken, shattered like chunks of ice across the surface of a thawing river. The flow of the river below...she remembered the pain, but it was dimmer now. Not like the days of agony that her mind hastened to shy away from. She felt her utter weakness and helplessness infuse every limb of her body. But she was alive. Weak. In pain. But alive. *Then how?*

When she did open her eyes, she saw the face of a being completely alien to her. He shook a rattle over her and made strange animal-like sounds. She was far too weak to rise. Her head still felt fuzzy,

and there was something seriously wrong with her. Rather than startle or fight, she decided to be patient, to wait and to watch. She was alive; it was more than she had hoped for. She needed to conserve her strength and try to stay that way.

Over the next few weeks, the strange being cared for her with tenderness and skill. He was unlike anything she had ever heard of: shaped somewhat like a man, but with longer arms and shorter legs. He had a gray face with protruding jaw and heavy brow, coarsened with whiskers. He was covered with long fur that may once have been orange, but had faded mostly to gray. The room she was in was primitive indeed. But, on the other hand, it was completely filled with beautiful flowers. She had grown up with stories of Kenku and Kitsune, Kitsune and Nezumi. Although his strange appearance was startling, he did not frighten her. Arahime could not help but think that anyone who valued the beauty of such flowers had to be more than he appeared.

Still, the aching loneliness was a dragging burden on her heart. At first the pain, the boredom, the inability to communicate, and the knowledge that her daisho, which she had fought so hard to save, was lost somewhere in the jungle, drove her deeper into a cycle of despair she found it hard to shake, filled with grief and doubt. How would she return to her clan without her daisho anyway? With the weakness that filled her, could she even serve as a yojimbo any more? When the being showed her that her daisho, at least it brought her the relief that she had not failed so utterly, that there was still more to do. That gave her enough strength to break out of the darkness. That gave her purpose.

But it did little to alleviate the boredom. So weak that she struggled for breath, she knew she had to move, and yet knew she could not. When she saw her caretaker making baskets, it was at least something. She started to work. Then a little more each day. She needed to move to get back her strength. And in her, deep in the very core of her being, the need to do something, to make things a little better. It helped drive away the shadows and gave her some sense of accomplishment, however small.

Her caretaker, sometimes, seemed to understand a few words of what she was saying. But he refused to stay and listen to her, or make any effort to understand her. She tried as hard as she could, but she could not understand his speech, for he chose to rarely, if ever, speak to her. It seemed almost as if he wanted her gone. After her previous days of travel in the jungle, Arahime knew her chances were slim of making it alone, at least as wounded as she was. Better to accommodate his silence, but it was lonely.

It was a joy to finally be able to rise and move and care for herself and finally, finally, be able to leave the tree-hut in which she had been confined for so long. To bathe, to move, to even be able to take up the sword again, it was a freedom sweeter than anything she could have remembered. Just to be able to live, and move, in spite of the pain. And to dance the blade again. But in the dancing...her wounds still bound her. Lungs failed, breath failed She tired so quickly. The skin would break open again. But she was getting stronger.

And then another came. The spider had been terrifying, but she was samurai. Weak as she was, it was her duty to stand against all things of Jigoku to defend the weak, and the giant spider was surely of Jigoku. And even if it wasn't, the one who was being threatened was of the kind that had protected her. She owed her caretaker her life. She would not allow harm to his helpless kin, if she could help it.

She wasn't entirely sure she could prevent it, given her weakness. But it had fled. She was fortunate.

And well rewarded. For the first time in months, there was another who would speak to her that understood her tongue. Who maybe could return her to Second City. There was finally a chance.

"What you want most now."

Her heart swelled with hope as she leaned forward. "Please take me back to Second City. Please help me go home."

"No!"

The rejection stung like a blow. Like a prison door opened for the captive and then slammed in her face. Arahime's immediate impulse was to lash out, or scream, but she was the one who was guest here. A guest treated well. Guests have obligations, and her personal pain was unimportant compared to that. But it was not their fault if these ones did not know where the city was. She could find ways to make that clear. "Do you know where it is?"

"Yes."

*Maybe they are just frightened of going that far. Maybe if I get well enough, I can make it if they show me how.* "Will you tell me how to get there by myself?"

"No."

Ideas flashed into her head of ways she could try to make them tell. Even if she was sick, and weak, she had the sword and ways to use it. But she was guest. And to do any bit of what was coming to mind was absolutely beyond dishonorable. Her body hurt so much an exhaustion claimed every piece of her. The despair of her situation overwhelmed her. As much as she desired to speak to anyone who knew her tongue, right at that moment, she couldn't focus, could barely think. She returned to her cot and let the exhaustion take her. She might be able to think of something else in the morning.

When she awakened, her caregiver, Yu'genta, came and brought to her roasted plantain, laid out on a large leaf. He bowed, something he had never done before, and stepped away. The other, the one who had named himself Ou'bouji, approached and also bowed. He straightened and leaned on his staff. "We sorry for test. We can help. But want to talk better. You want to talk better?"

She blinked in confusion, their actions and words so different than their treatment the previous day and the despair she had almost consigned herself to. The promise of hope was far too sweet to resist. "Yes. I would like to be able to talk to you better."

Ou'bouji bowed again. He turned and went to the corner of the hut, retrieving a large bundle wrapped in banana leaves and presenting it to her. "Here. Gift."

Her response was almost automatic. "I could not. I am unworthy of such a gift." A flush of heat went to her face as she remembered the differences in gift giving among the Zogeki. And whoever these beings might be were far more different still. *What if they take offense?*

But Ou'bouji simply offered again, "Yours. Gift."

Far more cautiously she offered with hesitation, "You have done me so much kindness already. How could I want more?"

"Yours. Gift." The monkey-like being offered the gift again patiently.

She bowed from her seated position on her pallet. "Then I accept. Thank you." She opened the bundle that Ou'bouji offered.

Laying in the banana leaves, she found a bundle of pure white cloth, embroidered with golden thread. *Real clothes!* Joy burst in her heart. Arahime never in her life imagined being so grateful for just the simple pleasure of having real clothing to wear. It could be the finest kimono in the Empire and she could not treasure it more.

Lying on top of the bundle of clothing, there was a deep plain wooden box. She opened it. In it, the upper tray lay a wide necklace or collar, of a type completely unlike any found in the Empire. It was a full hand-length wide, made of clear and smoothly polished diamonds set in gold. There were eight medallions of ivory amidst the jewels, each carved to resemble a different kind of flower. From the bottom hung two strands of beads: shimmering pearls and green jade. At the center of the collar there hung a large tear-cut emerald encircled with tiny diamonds and gold set to resemble the lotus flower. It was a dark jungle green, broken inside with light reflecting off the numerous flaws in the crystal. At the back was an intricate gold clasp that looked like a lock. The piece was beautiful and strange, and she ran her finger across it curiously, a small crease between her eyebrows.

Ou'bouji nodded, while Yu'genta leaned in to look closer. "Put on. I explain. No harm."

*Do I trust? Is understanding worth the risk?* Her heart knew the answer before her mind did. She had seen how fear of the unknown had caused needless pain. *Harun.* She lifted the necklace. *There is always risk in choosing to understand. Someone has to take that risk.* She set it around her neck, and let the two ends of the necklace click solidly into place at the back of her neck.

The necklace fit as though it had been made for her. The one who had given her the necklace raised his staff and brought it down with a thud on the floor. "Welcome, visitor from the foreign land of the samurai," he spoke. Arahime's mind reeled. With her ears, she knew he was not speaking Rokugani, but his own tongue of inhuman vocalizations. But some part of her mind, an inner voice, clearly understood him. It was not a simple translation of the words, for when he spoke the world welcome, her imagination supplied the image of a mother gesturing a guest inside for a meal. When he spoke the word Samurai, the image arose of a Spider samurai, brandishing a bloodied sword and glorying in the defeat of his enemy. She shook her head to clear it.



“What sort of magic is this?” she asked. She knew the words she spoke, felt them as her own, but they were not the words she spoke. Her ears heard similar sounds to that of Ou’bouji. She held her hand up to her throat in surprise, while her caretaker and this other both gave hoots that her own mind now understood as an expression of wonder and pleasure.

Ou’bouji gestured to the circle of heated stones, inviting her and her caretaker, Yu’genta, to sit. She rose from her bed, leaving the white cloth for the moment and the box, to join him. Once they had settled, he began his explanation.

“Since ancient times, our people, the Vānara,” ***‘The forest people,’*** that new voice in Arahime’s head interpreted as Ou’bouji continued, “have lived in these jungles. Until the time of the Great Destruction sixty years ago, the people of the Ivinda have been ruled by the Ikshwaku.” ***‘The Maharajah.’*** “By tradition, the first-wife’s sons of the Ikshwaku are raised to be holy warriors fighting the creatures of the hells. A chosen son is granted the sacred tulwar,” the image of a strange, curved sword flashed in Arahime’s mind, “carried by the previous generation, to guide and aid them in battle.”

Arahime nodded her understanding, still getting used to this small bundle of knowledge that helped interpret for her.

Ou’bouji continued. “By tradition, the daughters of the first wife of the Ikshwaku, the Apsaras,” ***‘Princesses,’*** the voice in Arahime’s head suggested, “are raised to be diplomats, sent among the nations to develop peace and understanding, so that war is not needed save against the creatures of hell. One chosen of each generation was given this necklace, blessed by the sacrifices of the previous generations and by the holiest Brahmin,” ***‘Wise Priests’*** “to help them understand and be understood by all peoples. Now, the Ikshwaku are gone, dead by the violence of the Ruhmalists,” ***‘The cultists of Kali Ma’*** “and the Vānara serve as guardians and protectors of their memories. Although the Ivindi are only children on the road of Dharma,” ***‘Right living’*** “the Ikshwaku descend in part from Kesari and Añjanā, from the bloodline of the ancient Vānara. We have an obligation to keep any harm from coming from their legacy. The necklace is called the navrathran haar.” ***Your big sister...*** the voice translated.

His words seemed to make sense, but Arahime still was shaky in her understanding, and some words could not have been correct. *Sister?* She gestured to the younger with the large face. “You are Ou’bouji. And you,” she gestured to the old Vānara. “are Yu’genta. You are Vānara. You found me in the jungle and have cared for me, even though I am not Vānara. I am very grateful that you have saved my life, but I miss my people very much. My family I know will miss me too, and there is a man I have a duty to protect if I can. I would dearly like to return one day.”

Yu’genta gestured at his chest. “I found you. You were foolish to let the flies taste such a wound. You must seal such injuries with the gum of the breadfruit tree quickly. It will keep the maggots from breathing and catches them as they come out for air.”

*I did not need that reminder.* Arahime shuddered delicately.

Ou’bouji gestured over the heated stones, and the smoke swirled in strange patterns that filled the hut

with symbols Arahime had never seen before. "You understand true," he said. "But we do not know you. You carry the knives of Samurai. Samurai have marched through these jungles under a Spider banner, destroying all before them, including our own people. Some of us have reached out to yours in peace and found themselves corrupted and made Shojo," *Those fallen to base desire and exiled*, the calm voice in Arahime's head interpreted. "But you do not act like them. Who are you?"

Once, being compared to the Onyx Spider might have triggered her hot temper, but it was such a relief to be speaking to someone, anyone, again that Arahime felt no heat at his honesty. "My name is Kakita Arahime. I am samurai, but samurai and..." she started to say 'kuge' but found herself instead making the words, " 'of the royal family' of the Crane clan." A desire to explain filled her. "We are nothing like the Spider. Our clan treasures peace, and trade, and beauty, and art."

The Vānara seemed pleased at her explanation and gestured that she continue.

"I told you how I got here, and that is the truth. I do not know exactly what was behind the attempt that was made to kill me. I do not know if it was just the actions of one of the Arashi family, or if it was a decision made for all, or even for all of the Zogeki. I do not know what would happen if I return. But my parents serve an important role in the Empire. I serve the only diplomat of the Crane to these lands. I need to go back." She made her plea one last time, the Vānara listening carefully to her every word.

Finally, Ou'bouji looked smugly satisfied, though Yu'genta still looked very concerned. Ou'bouji answered, "We cannot take you to this city. But this, we will do. We will take you to the nearest human. That one has been here a very long time. That one will know how you may go back to your people."

He gestured. "You may take with you the navrathran haar, if you wish. With it, the Ivindi people may be willing to aide you on your journey and tell you if it is safe to return to Second City. The bearer of the navrathran haar is sacred to them. But it is ours to protect. If you leave with it, I will lock the clasp. Once locked, it can only be removed when you choose to break the lock. If you do so, it shall return to our care. Let no one spoil the legacy of the First Princess."

Arahime held her hand to her throat again, uncertain. Jade, pearls, ivory. Such a thing was no tainted item. To be able to speak and understand...that was a skill of great value, one her father had tried to teach her though she lacked the gift, or the time to succeed given her duties at the Kakita Academy.  
*But....*

Yu'genta cut in. "She cannot travel yet. The journey is too difficult. She are still too weak from her long sleep. It would be at least another month of healing to travel, and it will take a month to reach that place. If those who seek to kill you are at the end..." he trailed off.

Arahime took a deep breath, or tried. The yawning emptiness of the left side of her chest and her empty lung forced again the consciousness of her terrible weakness upon her. If she were attacked, she might kill one in a single strike, but she could never take more than one, or a fight that extended past the first blow or two. She had no idea who her enemies truly were. She had to get stronger before she faced Second City.

And the idea of two more months trapped in silence was horrifying. "I will keep the navrathran haar," she answered quickly. "I will try to use it ..." She wanted to say '**with honor**', but the gentle voice in her mind whispered the words and shaped her throat to say, "along the path of dharma." She knew it meant almost the same thing...but there were differences she did not understand. She fell into silence.

The old Vānara nodded. The younger, larger one said, "Very well. This path is chosen. As to your family, duty to family is of great virtue. Among the Vānara we have gifts that can send messages in dreams and prophecy. Show me your heart, and when it is time, I will send your message to those you love the most."

*Mother. Father. Masarugi and Hideyaki, my brothers. A heartbeat. Harun.* "How do I show you my heart?"

Ou'bouji smiled amidst the symbols drawn in smoke. "You already have."

## Chapter 19

### **Spring, 1237 – Seawatch Castle**

Seawatch Castle. Where the Crane had sent their embarrassments for many centuries. The blue sky here met the gray sea in endless curls of white foam that beat against the dark cliffs. The keep had been damaged in the tsunami that had ravaged Crane lands, so there was no place to escape the sound of the waves against the shore, even in his dreams.

Harun was dreaming.

*Behind him, the ocean lapped a sandy shoreline. Before him the jungle was a solid wall of green, as impenetrable as Kaiu Kabe, as obscure as the mountains. As he walked towards it, its curtain parted slightly, and emerging from it a small figure, clothed in the pure white of death.*

*A white veil hung over her head, masking her face and hair completely. It could not conceal the curves of a female form. It not hide the cloth of white and gold that surrounded the figure's waist, leaving the belly bare, or the chains of gold and jewels that encircled her hips. The figure cradled two katana in her arms. One was slender, wrapped with blue in a pearl-white saya. It looked familiar...Harun had seen that sword in the ancestral shrine of his aunt Kyoumi and uncle Kousuda's home in Otosan Uchi. The other, however, had tsuka, tsuba, and tassel all of fiery orange, with a saya of purest copper tipped with small gold flames. It shone with an unearthly silver light that sent flickers across the white veil that shrouded the figure's features.*

*He heard her voice, Arahime's voice. "Harun-kun!" She sounded very far away.*

*He stepped closer. **Could it be her?** "Arahime-chan?"*

*She took a step towards him and suddenly she was very, very close. He could see the ornate jewels that crossed her brow, holding the veil in place. He could see more jewels on her hands, with rings on her fingers attached to chains that extended to bracelets at her wrists. He could hear her soft breathing, feel the warmth of her presence. He reached forward to touch the veil that hid her face, then gripped it and lifted it up.*

*She looked up at him. Those same wide almond eyes, gray as the sea on a cloudy day. Hair as white as the sea foam at the crest of the waves. But completely alien too. Around her neck, a heavy collar of diamonds and emeralds, ivory and jade, lavish with gold. And in one side of her nose, a large but delicate ring of pure gold, decorated with tiny pearls, attached by a chain to her hair above her ears. In her ears, earrings, ornate with jewels, hung.*

*He staggered back, completely shocked, "Arahime?" he asked again.*

*The one he thought he had always known gave a small, mysterious smile, reaching up to touch his hand with hers. "I am not dead. Please don't forget me. I'm alive! I promised I would come back and I will. I'm trying to get back."*

*At her words, he reached forward to grab her, to make sure she could not escape him, to make sure he would not lose her for even one more moment. But even as reached out, she disappeared in his arms like an illusion of mist and magic, the creation of one of his aunt Kyoumi's stories.*

*"Remember me."*

*Her words lingered on the sultry air. But his hand grasped at nothing. She was gone.*

*She's alive!*

Harun awoke before dawn. The first real smile on his face for the for the first time in months. His hand still fresh from the touch of Arahime's hand. She was different, not just the gaijin jewelry she wore, but she looked thinner, harder. She looked as if she had been through a great ordeal, she had survived but it had changed her.

And it was that, more than anything else, that convinced Harun that this wasn't just a dream borne out of his own desires and fancies. That convinced him that Arahime was still alive. And that he had been right all along.

The question now, of course, was what to do about it.

His first instinct was to start a letter to his Aunt Kyoumi. Surely this would lighten the load of her new duties as the Voice of the Emperor. But he had scarcely put his brush on the page when he stopped.

How could he explain this properly? It seemed so silly when he tried to write it down. Harun knew

that Arahime was alive, but somehow he couldn't translate conviction onto paper.

And there was another reason he couldn't say anything. He had promised his Uncle Kousuda that he would never speak of Arahime to Kyoumi. And even though things had changed, that he was now certain Arahime was alive, this wasn't enough to break the promise he had made. Not when it still could cause so much pain.

Harun put down his brush.

Outside, the sun was rising above the sea. Another day was beginning at Seawatch Castle. Harun carried around the secret inside him without saying a word. However, more than once he caught himself thinking back to the previous winter. When he had been at Kyuden Hida. And remembering a conversation he had had with Lord Shibatsu, brother of the Emperor and Champion of the Spider Clan.

## Chapter 20

### ***Spring, 1237 – The Unknown Lands***

The two Vānara had left. Ou'bouji was once again on his way with promises to return in a month when Arahime was ready to travel. And Yu'genta was out foraging in the jungle. They left her alone to examine the rest of the gifts she had received.

She removed the tray in the box that had held the necklace and found below it many more pieces of jewelry. She picked up the first and largest piece, some sort of jeweled belt with dangling chains, meant to go around the waist. Its colors and style matched the necklace; it was clear all the pieces were part of a set. She wrinkled her nose. The Kakita of course knew she had an important duty of representing her clan, bearing herself with dignity as a representative of the Lady Doji. Many female courtiers wore some beautiful jewels. But these jewels were so lavish, so colorful and overdone. Even Harun would laugh at her if she wore such things. She took out a pair of large, dangling earrings such as the finest courtiers might wear. *Fine battlegarb, Bushi*, she smiled. A fine hoop of gold wire larger than a koku coin and attached to a chain followed. *Three earrings? That's different.* A headpiece of jeweled gold disks. Rings and bracelets joined by chains, anklets and broaches. She pushed all the strange jewelry back into the box and shoved it aside. None of these were useful for travelling.

She pulled apart the bundle of white and gold cloth. Within there was a piece of clothing of some kind, similar to the gaijin tunics the heimen of the Ivindi wore, but made of gold cloth and very small. She pulled it over her head. It fit snugly about her, with sleeves that covered the upper part of her arms. It was not uncomfortable – indeed, it seemed to fit perfectly – but it showed every curve and barely reached the bottom of her ribs. It still felt good to have the wound on her back protected from view and further injury. A pair of finely embroidered cloth shoes fit her feet perfectly, though it felt strange to walk in them. There was a sheer white veil which she set aside. The only other thing within was a single very, very long piece of white silk edged with gold embroidery.

Taking the long piece of cloth, she tried to figure out a way to wrap it around herself to grant her at least some measure of modesty. She thought, perhaps, with time, a needle and thread she might be able to rend the delicate silk into some sort of wearable kimono, though her Crane blood was horrified she would consider destroying cloth of such beauty. Even if she had wanted to, however, she had no needle or thread. She needed to find some way to make this work intact. But her hands

fumbled, and it slipped down after only a few steps. *I can't even walk in this!*

***'Here, little sister. Let me help you.*** The voice was her own, the thoughts nearly indistinguishable from her own. But it felt as though another's hands were guiding hers as they picked up the fallen fabric. Her hands, simply, with practiced skill, wrapped the cloth around her waist and pleated it smoothly in front of her, securing it with a small gemmed broach from the box of gems. More practiced pleats, and Arahime drew the cloth across her chest and over her shoulder, securing it with another broach. By the time she was done, all was secured and covered, and the duelist was able to move freely.

"What is this? How could this be?" Arahime said the words aloud to the empty room. "Who are you?"

A hesitation, and then the voice in her head answered, ***"My poor lost sister, to be raised in such foreign and violent lands. I made this sacrifice to help teach my younger sisters to learn all the things that you must know to create peace and prosperity for all people. I will teach you, little sister. Do not be afraid."***

*I am afraid.* Arahime thought about ripping off the necklace and sending it back to wherever it came from. But the specter of loneliness frightened her worse. She had not lied to the Vānara; the Crane valued peace and prosperity. All her life, all her mother's life, they had lived in the shadows of war. The world had been shattered by it. Now, though, things were changing. It would be the duty of the Crane to rebuild the world again, and rebuild it in a different age, an age filled with gaijin and rinjin and Daidoji pepper and shattered Isawa and giant Kaiu machines. Her father had told her how difficult that would be. If she passed up this unique opportunity, it would be a loss.

*If I could learn how to deal with the courts of Zogeku...maybe I can help Mushari even if I can't fight properly.* She brushed her fingers across the beads of jade and ivory, historically immune to the taint. *It doesn't feel evil. It doesn't seem to be for evil purpose. Maybe I can use this to help my family.* A twinge of pain in her chest, just the memory of the much greater pain she would feel if she pushed herself too far. *Maybe I can still be useful to my clan, even if these wounds do not heal.*

She did not take the necklace off. *I never had a sister. I always wanted one.* It would take time to get used to, but the Kakita was willing to learn.

Arahime picked up the jeweled belt. With no obi, she did not have much choice. She secured it around her waist, the jeweled chains flashing and sparkling at her hips. It was gaudy, but held firm and steady enough for her daisho. When she slid the blades into place, she almost felt whole again.

The cool nights and warm days of winter gave way to the heat of spring. Arahime poured her days wholly into regaining her strength and her training. She began to forage in the forest with Yu'genta, who showed her which foods were edible, which trees had healing properties. The old Vānara was crotchety and philosophical. He grumbled about everything, though never in Ou'bouji's presence...the guru reminded him that one must receive one's circumstances with acceptance. He told her of the great numbers of Vānara had been slaughtered by the Spider in the Empress's name during the Age of Conquest, and how those who remained had hidden from the Rokugani, save for a few who had met with the Mantis before the Spider came. Those who had become cut off from their people fell to human ways, which from the way Yu'genta described them, were weak, violent, and

decadent.

Arahime tried to explain to the old man that not all Rokugani were like the Spider. The warriors of Rokugan shielded the world against the forces of Jigoku. She spoke of the mysticism of the monks and the devotion of the shugenja and the discipline of the bushi.

Yu'genta, unimpressed, snorted and walked away.

Her dreams grew strange. Arahime rarely remembered her dreams, but those first few days after Ou'bouji had left were different.

*She dreamed of her youngest brother, Hideyaki, dressed in red hakama and a white jubon, meditating in a large, cold chamber with heavy stone walls. She could see him perfectly in her mind's eye: his curly brown hair and dark black eyes. Before him was a small red paper pinwheel. Her heart filled with fondness then pride, as the pinwheel started turning quickly in the windowless room. The boy allowed himself a small smile as he watched the pinwheel spin.*

*She dreamed of Masarugi, his wavy black hair cut short, as he practiced his kata side by side with another student. The student next to him was dressed identically to him, but Arahime knew immediately that the slightly chubby boy was Iweko Kiseki, oldest son of the Emperor. Both were doing well, but Masarugi had a grace, a gift, and the boken moved like it was made to be in his dark hands. Arahime always remembered Masarugi as a laughing child, full of fun and tricks, but this teenager was deadly serious. When Kiseki whispered some laughing comment, Masarugi shot him a glare. "Be serious!" That was not like what she remembered at all.*

*She dreamed of her father. He was arguing passionately with a Daidoji on a dock somewhere. By his mons, it was the Shireikan of the Iron Warriors, but surely Arahime was dreaming that, for she had never seen the man. Her father's hair was much grayer than it had been at her Topaz Championship. Eventually, the Shireikan threw up his hands in defeat and gestured her father on his way. Her father bowed and continued up the gangplank onto the ship that was docked there.*

*She dreamed of her mother, but she could barely recognize her. She was dressed in a stiff, formal kimono in imperial jade and white, embellished with gold chrysanthemums. Her hair was dyed black, and was lacquered into an ornate style with jade hairpins. Her face had been painted white with lips of cherry red and gray eyes shadowed with blue. It was an expressionless mask offering nothing but beauty. Her mother stood at the top of three steps before a room full of elegantly dressed courtiers. At the top of the stairs, there was a heavy gold screen; Arahime could not see who was on the other side. Arahime knew it was her mother who stood there, could hear the warmth of her voice when she spoke. Even so, her mother seemed as distant as the moon.*

*And she dreamed of Harun. He stood balanced on a stump jutting out of the narrow beach near a heavily-damaged castle. He was gazing out to sea, eyes fixed on distant horizon. He was different too. His hair was long and curly. His scant beard had grown thicker. He had a pair of scars on his jawline that were visible because the beard had not yet hidden them. He wore a thick purple cloak, though his armor was sky blue. He balanced on one leg without the slightest waver, drawing and resheathing his katana in fluid motions.*

*She couldn't tell what he was thinking. But he was alive.*

When she told Yu'genta about the dreams, he shrugged. "Ou'bouji told you he would tell them you lived. He kindly shares them with you also. He may not have the skills En'you once had, but your samurai ways killed him. Ou'bouji is a wise teacher, and generally kind. You should be grateful."

There were other dreams: of walking through the endless halls of a painted palace gilded with gold, of playing a strange stringed instrument, of dancing and making men smile until they agreed to do things they never would have otherwise. Those dreams weren't like her at all. But she didn't speak of those to Yu'genta.

A month had passed. Arahime and the old Vānara had prepared supplies for a journey, travelling further and further away from the hut to build the duelist's endurance. The guru of the Vānara had arrived the night before, and they planned to depart at dawn before the heat grew intolerable. Yu'genta changed Arahime's bandages one last time.

"Humm," her caretaker made a thoughtful grunt.

She knew. "It's not getting any better. My endurance is not returning. This wound is not healing, is it?"

Yu'genta shook his head. "No. It is not. I had to remove too much that had been poisoned. If I did not, it would have rotted and taken your life."

She knew. "Will it ever?"

"Only Vishnu knows of forever. But not by any skill I know. It is healed that way now. It is part of you."

The guru arrived, and, together, they headed into the jungle on ways known only to the Vānara. Arahime glanced over her shoulder as the little clearing in which she had lived for so long disappeared from view. *I thought I knew who I was when I was brought to this jungle. But do I know who will emerge from it?* Resolving to hide her weariness as best she could, she straightened and pushed forward on the path her caretakers had made. *Someone who tried her best*, she decided. *That would have to be enough.*

## Chapter 21

### **Late Spring, 1237 – The Unknown Lands**

The ways of the Vānara are not the ways of man, and the face the jungle shows to the Vānara was not the face that had gazed upon Arahime when she had travelled it before. In many ways it was far less generous: Arahime had been fortunate to travel when fruit was in season; she doubted she would have found anything to eat in these days. But at the Vānaras' touch the jungle did not hesitate to open other kinds of bounty of plants and foods she would not have considered edible until Yu'genta had introduced them.



Their passage was swift enough. Both of her caretakers knew of hidden roadways and secret bridges buried beneath the jungle plants, and it was on these roads that they moved. They walked or swung easily through the trees above. But Arahime's ability to travel was hampered; she could not travel more than a few miles without resting. It made for slow going. The duelist knew that once it would have spurred her into hours of extra work just to hide her embarrassment at her weakness and out of impatience to get there. But she knew what death tasted like, now. She had to be gentle with herself or she would never reach Second City at all.

Ancient pillars of stone or fragments of buildings peaked out from under draping veils of green vines blessed with big orange and red blossoms. The carvings on them were eroded heavily with the passage of water and time, but sometimes Arahime could make out a few of the designs. She paused before one slightly less worn than the others, gazing up at the line of swirling designs that decorated the top.

Yu'genta grumbled again when he realized she was not with them. "She stopped again." He and Ou'bouji easily swung back to the place where she stood, a puzzled crease between her eyebrows.

"When the battle of the Jareshi river?" she asked.

Yu'genta made a low rumble in his throat. "About seven hundred years ago. A great war leader of the Rakshasa emerged with the goal of conquering all the lands east to Ivory Palace and slaying the maharaja. He hoped to free his brothers from Vishnu the Protector's imprisonment, and his armies stretched to the horizon. He was defeated here. My mother was there. She was considered a great healer in her day."

The girl nodded and turned away from the pillar, continuing along the path.

Ou'bouji watched the exchange with a private, knowing smile. "The Princess likes her," he said softly, though his fellow could not overhear. *She will serve us very well.*

The Ivory Palace stood at the heart of the ruins of a great city that once dominated the countryside all around. The jungle, however, was quickly claiming the ruins and twisted trees and bushes grew in and amongst all the rubble of the city. Around the outskirts of the city, warning symbols and grim graffiti painted the walls of various buildings. Many shredded and tattered wards sought to repel ghosts and unnatural creatures, but Arahime could only hear the normal cries of jungle animals.

Towering above the jungle and the ruined city rose a huge staircase reaching upwards into the sky. When they reached the bottom of the steps, the Vānara stopped.

"We will go no further. At the top of the steps is the Ivory Palace of the Maharaja. When the cult of Kali-Ma gained in strength, we sought him out with our warnings, but we were ordered away, and we shall not return until a new Maharaja invites us to," Ou'bouji told Arahime.

Yu'genta agreed. "The Samurai is inside. The samurai has been there many, many years. The samurai

will tell you how to reach the sea, and Second City, and help you find your place. The samurai is very powerful and knows many things.”

“How do you know this? Which samurai is this?” Now that the moment was on her, Arahime felt a surge of both elation and fear. She knew she would face and defeat Purashi one day, but so much had changed.

Ou’bouji waved his hands in the air as if the questions were annoying insects. “Why? You will find out soon.” He then lowered his hands, and said, “We will not meet again, except in dreams perhaps. But it is your destiny to bring endings. May such endings be peaceful ones, and may they bring peace to all those who lie within the living.”

Yu’genta unshouldered the bag she had created long ago from her hakama once, now fully laden with fruits, vegetables, and starches for a journey. “There is food here, and medicine, and water, enough for a week, if the Samurai is unready or unwilling to travel. The sea is only three days south of here, along the royal road. Do not forget to treat your wound each day.”

Arahime knelt on one knee before the old Vānara. “I won’t. Thank you, Yu’genta, one last time, for saving me.”

Yu’genta snorted. “Goodbye, Egret. You are a pretty enough bird. May Vishnu the Protector smile upon you. Do not damage my Dharma with your murdering ways!”

Arahime, used to such talk, gave a small smile. “I will try not to,” she answered quietly, reaching out to take the big Vānara’s hand. “Be well.”

The foolish old man did not answer, instead pulling his hand back and putting it over his eyes so he would not have to watch her leave.

The guru, Ou’bouji stepped forward. “Many blessings upon you. May you help lead the samurai of Rokugan far to Viveka, the path of discernment. Or at least help teach them the ways of non-Violence so they are not all lost. Goodbye, little one.”

Arahime bowed to Ou’bouji. She then straightened, shouldered the bag, and turned away, already setting her feet on the steps up to the Ivory Palace and its fabled ghosts and secrets.

## Chapter 22

### **Late Spring, 1237 – The Ivory Palace**

The ruins were eerie now that Arahime was alone. From the steps, she could see the outline of the great city through the trees below her. She imagined it bustling with thousands of people. Warriors. Priests. Elders. Children. Thousands sacrificed for power, to summon the Goddess Kali-Ma. It was all silent and still now. *Is that what it would be like in the Empire if Kanpeki had won? Is this what Yuhmi wants?* She could not imagine.

The gates to the Palace had fallen down. Most of the gold that had leafed them had been scraped off by greedy looters...heimen or samurai, Arahime could not say. She could see

places where jewels or sculptures had been broken away. A thick layer of undisturbed dust blanketed the remaining pieces of shattered furniture. The palace itself was dimly lit by shafts of sunlight piercing through holes in the roof. The ever-pervasive vines draped themselves near such pools of sunlight. Occasionally, she could hear the sound of a snake slithering away, or a rodent skitter out of her path, but otherwise, the palace was completely still.

“Hello?” Arahime called as she moved forward through the gloom.

There was no response.

The green gloom did not frighten her. There was an odd familiarity about the place. As a small child, she’d often been within the confines of the Imperial Palace in Otosan Uchi, though never in the forbidden areas reserved for the Imperial Household alone. Moving through these silent halls felt like she had passed the gate guards and was just venturing into new rooms in a place she had often thought of as home.

An unfamiliar broken polearm with three points lay on the floor before her, atop a large spot of smeared dark brown. **A trishula**, the voice in her head offered. It was quiet, hard to distinguish from her own thoughts, but Arahime could sense the sadness. *This was Big Sister’s Home. No wonder it feels familiar.* She took a drink of water from the gourd Yu’genta had given her and pushed on.

Led by instinct and half-forgotten memory, Arahime found herself approaching the columns of a vast audience chamber. A window made of diamonds of stained glass cast rainbows of light throughout the room. The walls were painted with many pictures of strange, alien gods and goddesses with many arms, holding flowers and weapons and musical instruments. But the paint was flaking off, and many of the tiny panes of glass were broken. Vines and flowers curled around some of the broken pillars and statues at the edges of the room, these blooming with tiny white flowers that looked like stars. The duelist walked forward slowly, gray eyes wide with wonder.

At one end of the chamber, below the stained glass, seven steps of scarlet tile led up to a similarly-tiled dais. Rotted pillars, still flaked here and there with gold, no longer held the broken lattice-work canopy that stood over the place. Jewels clearly had pocked the whole canopy over, but they had all been stripped now. One or two, glistening, remained, but Arahime refused to touch them. She drew her hand away. “This would have been amazing, once,” she said aloud.

“So pass Emperors and Maharajas and Gods and Men.” The voice was old, ancient even, hoarse from disuse.

Arahime whirled, trying to find its source. “Who are you?” she said, her eyes making patterns out of shadows. “Are you a Samurai of Rokugan?”

One of the piles of vines she had dismissed as an overgrown statue moved slowly, pulling away the vines that had concealed it with a wizened hand. “Yes.” The voice was like the

sound of the wind rattling the dry leaves of autumn: peaceful, ancient. Arahime hurried closer to help.

Once the vines had been pulled away, the light of the stained glass window revealed a very old woman who had been almost completely hidden by the plants growing over her. A hood was pulled far down over her face; Arahime could barely see her wrinkled lips, pursed with thought. Her hands were webbed with veins. The cloak she wore covered her completely. It was ragged with the passage of time and the jungle's humidity. A naked katana lay in her lap, her hand resting lightly on the black-wrapped tsuka decorated with a red tassel.

Arahime took a step back, remembering her courtesy. No matter who this person was, to have reached such an age, to have been here so long, surely demanded her respect. The Vānara spoke of a powerful and trustworthy samurai. The Crane gave the woman a very deep bow.

"Honored Elder," Arahime said, presenting herself as is right for an inferior samurai. "My name is Kakita Arahime of the line of Kashiwa. I am honored to be in your presence."

The old woman slowly reseathed her blade in a black saya encrusted with pearls. "So polite, Crane. It has been many years. What brings you to the Dead Kingdom?"

Arahime hesitated. She was not wearing her mons or kimono; she had nothing to explain herself but her daisho and her white Crane hair. If the old woman could see at all with her hood pulled that low. *What can I say really?* She settled on a simple version of the truth. "I am only just past my gempukku from the Kakita Academy, Honored Elder. I was sent to be Yojimbo to the Crane Ambassador to Zogeku, Doji Mushari. I...fell...overboard, and was lost in the jungle."

The old woman smiled gently. "I can tell you are alone, Kakita Arahime-san. I can tell you are young. I can hear in your voice that you have not been in the Ruined Kingdom for long. You have the chi of a bushi trained. I can tell there is Shiba in your blood. These old eyes, if blind, see more than perhaps you might think. My name is Shiba Tsukimi. Have you heard of it?"

The Crane's eyes widened with surprise and she threw herself down in the full bow appropriate to a Clan Champion. "Of course!" she offered. "The missing Champion of the Phoenix! I didn't realize!"

Tsukimi made a gesture with her hand indicating that she should rise. As Arahime did so, the Phoenix Clan Champion then pulled back her hood. She wore a red blindfold over her eyes, and her long hair was thin and gray. *She must be a hundred years old!* Arahime realized with wonder.

"Come. Sit with me. Tell me of your journeys," Shiba Tsukimi gestured to a place opposite her on the step. "There is wood there for a fire. You are hungry." She pointed over at the shattered remnants of a cabinet across the room. "The mysteries of the Path of Man

transcend the desire for base comforts like food or companionship. But such comforts are...nice...at my age.”

Arahime did as she was bid, forced to admit to herself that she was getting very tired and hungry anyway. Yu’genta had shown her how to start a fire, so she cleared a space around the ancient Champion and laid out a meal for them to share: manioc cakes and roasted poon tree seeds, lotus root baked in the coals and strips of dried bael fruit. She felt a little rush of nervousness as she presented the meal on a banana leaf to the Champion. She had walked in the halls of power of Otsan Uchi. Her mother served the Chosen. She had served as assistant instructor for the Emperor’s oldest son, and her younger brother was Kiseki’s classmate and best friend. But those relationships were all strictly bound by tradition and the laws of courtesy. Here, the Phoenix Champion was just a person, a strange old woman in a jungle temple. There were no rules for this.

For her part, Tsukimi seemed happy to let propriety fall, complimenting her fire-making skills and the food that had been prepared and telling a story of a time soon after her own gempukku as a bushi fighting the Yobanjin. With gentle encouragement, she drew Arahime’s story from her. Arahime told her of her family and being sent to the Colonies, of Doji Mushari and the arranged marriage, and being thrown overboard by Arashi Parushi. Of surviving, wounded, and of the Vānara who cared for her and brought her to the palace. Tsukimi listened attentively through it all.

“And how goes the war?” Tsukimi asked when it she was done. “I was in Second City with Isawa Shunryu when the Emperor’s edict was declared, ordering the surrender of the Elemental Masters. We decided that he should deliver himself to the Emperor’s mercy and join the Brotherhood, and he has told me of the affairs of the Phoenix Clan. But he is closely watched and rarely comes with news from the rest of the Empire.”

Like most of her classmates, Arahime had eagerly followed every rumor of the war that she could glean from her sensei at the Academy, and what little news letters from her parents or Uncle Karasu might reveal. But she was still considered a child until her gempukku, and then she had been sent far away. “I don’t know what you already know Shiba-sama. There is so much, and for most, I only know what I have been taught...”

The Shiba’s lips curled upward as she warmed her hands by the small fire although it was not cold. “Then tell me everything. For, by your years, I think you were not even born when the Emperor’s Judgement upon the Phoenix was announced, and it would be interesting to hear the perspective History will make of it.

Kakita Arahime drew her knees up. *Where to begin?* “I will try, Shiba-sama.” She took a deep breath, focused on the firelight, and began the tale.

“I suppose I can start at the Winter Court where the Edict that deposed the Council of Elemental Masters was passed. The Lord of the Dragon had called the clans together to Winter Court before the Emperor to unite. That is where my father, Ide Kousuda, met my mother, Kakita Kyoumi, and married into the Crane. I was born the following year.

“There had been a peace, but I know fighting began that spring. Daigotsu Kanpeki, the Onyx Lord, struck with great fury the summer after the Winter Court. Thousands died. But the greatest target of his wrath was the Scorpion who had betrayed him. He was thwarted by the Scorpion Daimyo, Bayushi Nitoshi, who struck at him with some terrible poison. It did not kill Kanpeki, but made him insane, shattering his mind but leaving his body living. Nitoshi was killed for it, most of the Scorpion that had followed Kanpeki were slaughtered by the Onyx forces. After that, the Onyx armies became erratic, misguided. They began fighting among themselves, or moving in strange directions for no reason, as if the forces of Jigoku did not know how to fight together without one will to guide them. They were still terribly strong though, and the lands suffered greatly.

“At that winter court, thanks to the forgiveness and grace of the Fire Dragon, it was learned that the seals that bound Jigoku could be resealed. I know they first tried the ritual at the location of the seal in Crane Lands the following spring. There was a terrible battle as the Onyx tried to stop them. It took two more years for the shugenja to figure out how to reseat the site of the seal in Mantis lands. I am told the Phoenix Shugenja who still served were able to raise it from the ocean floor while the fleets kept the shadow-tainted sea monsters away. As each seal closed, the power of Jigoku grew less, and that, combined with the Onyx Lord’s mad behavior, greatly weakened the forces of the Onyx.

“The third seal was deep in Shinomen forest. The Crab were able to create a huge siege as a bluff, Sensei Kenshin said, while a small scouting party was able to locate the site itself and seal it. But when they did so, they realized that there were two other seals...that there had once been a seal for each element, but the remaining two seals had not been previously known.

“The year I started at the Academy, the Dragon determined that the site of one of the remaining seals was the Second Festering Pit in Scorpion Lands. It was Kanpeki’s study of this seal, broken by the fall of the Destroyer, that led to his learning of the Seals and their power in the first place. But the Second Festering Pit was deep in Onyx Lands. The Shogun, Akodo Kano, raised a mighty army from the Imperial Legions and the Lion to capture and seal the Pit, but they were defeated. Kanpeki was killed, during the battle I suppose.

“Many people thought, even after this defeat, with Kanpeki dead things would get better. But it got much, much worse. Famine struck again; I know our sensei went hungry. The Unicorn Lands, Scorpion Lands, and much of Crane lands were still tainted. The armies of the Onyx were able to rally in a way they had not in the previous years. They were weaker; three seals after all had been closed, and the forces of the Empire were united against them. But the Empire lost much of the ground that had been retaken. As children, we were sheltered from it, but even the Academy had to be evacuated twice. I remember my mother speaking of terrible fighting amongst the clans and between the Shogun and my Uncle Karasu, the Emerald Champion, as people tried to determine who to blame. Much later, we were told that a new being, as much oni as man, by the name of Yuhmi, had taken Kanpeki’s place. He had risen as the new Lord Onyx.

“Even so, the forces of the Empire were able to push back and capture the Second Festering Pit and seal it four years later. The Shogun died heroically in battle the following spring, and a new Shogun, Utaku Chikara, was picked by the Emperor. That ended the infighting also. It took another year to locate the site of the last seal: a secret temple in Moto lands. I don’t know how it was found. But the Unicorn took the site and sealed it four years ago this spring.”

Arahime took a sip of water from her drinking gourd. “The fighting did not stop, but hope survives. Yuhmi still controls the Onyx, though they draw their forces in towards the Shinomen and Toshi Ranbo. Harun...” she paused, trying to hide a blush she was somewhat certain that Tsukimi could see despite her blindfold. “...I mean, I have friends who were going to be deployed in the Imperial Legions. So the battle goes on. I do not know what will happen next. There were hopes to kill this oni that leads them, and to, somehow, purify the lands and reconcile the heavens with the earth again. The shugenja still preach of the failure of the samurai, but we do not know what to do.” She shakes her head. “I’m not a shugenja. Maybe not even a bushi any more. I don’t pretend to understand the Heavens, so I just try to serve with honor and follow in the path of my ancestors as best I can. That is everything I know.”

Shiba Tsukimi was silent throughout. When the young woman had finished, she gave a small, sad smile. “Appeasing the heavens. Even the Fire Dragon can forgive us, but how do we forgive ourselves for our failures?”

The pain in the old woman’s voice stirred Arahime to try to offer comfort. “All the clans failed, Tsukimi-sama. It was not just the Phoenix. All the clans are trying, now. If the heavens are still angry with us, they should tell us what to do. Otherwise, we can only do the best we can.”

The Phoenix Clan Champion closed her eyes. “Maybe they have told us, and we are too frightened to listen.”

Arahime did not know what to say. The sun had set and she gazed at the fire and the outlines of the old woman engulfed in shadow in silence.

After a time, the Champion caressed the katana she held one last time. “Thank you for sharing your meal and the news with me. It would have been nice to see Shunryu again, but I am certain for a Master of the Void, nothing is ever far from his gaze. I think...I would like to sleep now. Do you sing, young Crane?” The question was strange, and Tsukimi’s voice had grown weary. It seemed, for that moment, that the Champion of the Phoenix really was just an old, tired woman who wanted to rest.

“I know many songs,” Arahime confessed. “My mother loved to sing. But I am not very good at it.”

The old woman lay down on the ground near the fire, wrapping herself in her cloak. “Please sing to me, Arahime-chan. We have been away for so very long.” She rested her head on her

hand, speaking in sleepy whisper.

Arahime blushed. Her voice was certainly nothing worthy of merit by the standards of the Kakita. *But how can I deny such a request?* She tried to think back to the songs her mother had sung her as a little child. One, she remembered, had come from her mother's years at Kuyden Shiba among the Shiba Artisans.

---

*I am a child of the sea.*

*In the pine-covered seashore which white waves wash upon,  
there is a humble home, and smoke comes out from its window.*

*That is my dearest old home.*

*Right after I was born, I took my first bath in sea water,*

*heard the sound of the waves as lullabies,*

*breathed the sea air which was carried over a long distance,*

*and grew up as a child.*

*The strong smell of the sea is*

*like the fragrance of flowers*

*that never fades throughout the year.*

*The wind that sways the pine branches upon the shore*

*sounds like wonderful music to my ears.*

---

She fell silent. The old woman had fallen asleep, curled up peacefully with the sword she bore. Arahime curled up on the other side of the fire, holding her own daisho protectively. *Maybe she will be able to tell me how to get back to Second City in the morning.*

## Chapter 23

### **Late Spring, 1237 – The Ivory Palace**

“Wake up, Daughter of Doji.”

The voice was deep. Powerful. Serene. Arahime opened her eyes.

It was still dark. A few stars twinkled through the small gap in the cracked dome of painted sky. On the ground before her, the fire glowed as a handful of rosy embers.

Across the fire, she could see the cloak that had covered the old woman, but she was not there. Arahime sat up, laying her hand on her saya.

Standing over her was a tall shadow barely visible in the dim light. The shadow walked to the small pile from the broken cabinets, picked up an armload of wood, and returned, setting the biggest piece on the low coals. The dry wood crackled into life with a burst of flame and a small shower of sparks.



In the brighter glow, Arahime could see that the shadow was really Shiba Tsukimi. But not as she had left her. This woman was old, true, but strong. She stood straight, like a trained soldier, and carried the wood like a bushi half her age. Her daisho rode easily at her hip. Arahime rubbed her tired eyes with the back of a hand and climbed to her feet. "Tsukimi-sama...has something happened?"

The deep voice answered, the Phoenix reaching out a hand to rest it on Arahime's shoulder. "Tsukimi-san has finally decided that the time has come for her to lay down her burden and rest. She at last realizes that it is time to let me go."

Arahime looked up into the taller woman's face with eyes still hidden behind the blindfold. Confusion occluded hers. "I don't understand. I am sorry."

Tsukimi-not-Tsukimi gave her a sad smile, filled with compassion, and lowered her hand. "You may be Doji's Daughter, Arahime-chan, but your grandmother, Nejin, was one of mine, and you have her smile. I have never forgotten even one of my children. None of us have. Perhaps that is why it has been so hard for us to leave you. There is duty and honor and glory in Tengoku. But the virtues of Ningen-do are love and death, and Ningen-do is a jealous realm. To touch Ningen-do is to know love. It is a hard thing to let go. "

To say it aloud seemed like utter foolishness. But here, in the quiet darkness so far from everything she had ever known...she could accept that. She thought she understood. "Shiba-no-kami?" Arahime fell to her knees and pressed her head to the floor.

"Yes. Rise, little one. I do not want to fail to do what I must any longer than necessary, for your sakes. Tengoku is closest to Ningen-do at dawn. You must listen now, and do as I say."

Arahime straightened, still kneeling before the Champion. "Hai!"

"You will go to Second City on the first day of Summer Court and present yourself to the Warlord. Powerful representatives of all the clans will be there, as will representatives of the Emerald Champion and of the Brotherhood of Shinsei." Tsukimi *Shiba* paced with a calm energy as she spoke.

"You will need proof." She stripped the blindfold from her eyes. They were a mass of hideous scars, destroyed by the poison of a Scorpion's blade. She carefully folded the red strip of cloth and handed it to Arahime. "That will serve." Arahime reverently accepted the blindfold, still not entirely certain she was not dreaming.

The Phoenix turned and went to the place where Arahime first saw the old woman wrapped in ivy. She bent and pried a stone from the floor, itself hidden under the vines that had concealed Tsukimi. She pulled a wood and cloth prayer satchel from under the stone. Then she strode back towards the kneeling Crane.

"Within this satchel are letters. They are not for you. They regard the future governance of the Phoenix clan and the Shiba family. Much sorrow has come because the Phoenix look outside themselves to find the wisdom to stay their hand. They have always relied on me. I have loved them

and not abandoned them. Even when my mother called me home, I heard their cries and returned to guide them, as we always have.” She gave Arahime the satchel. “The heavens groan with the lessons they failed to learn, for we were always there. We withdrew to see if they would find their way without us. The pain of such testing may have torn the Phoenix apart, but they are rising again, without us.”

Arahime, gray eyes wide, accepted the satchel also, carefully setting the blindfold on top of it.

“I do not want to leave,” Tsukimi-not-Tsukimi said aloud, still pacing. “But the influence of Tengoku must decrease if the influence of Jigoku is to decrease. We disrupt the balance. Hantei understood this. All of us followed in our turn, even Shinjo, but love keeps calling us back. The touch of Ningendo is strong. Tell them I do not abandon them...I hear their prayers even now, and I will when I stand with the Fortunes. Tell them...”

She looked down at the young woman with wide, innocent eyes who clearly understood very little, and gave a crooked smile. “The letters say what must be said. I consign my clan to the Brotherhood of Shinsei. Shinsei will help them make their new way.”

“Yes, Shiba-no-kami,” Arahime accepted the burden, numb in her confusion but humbly accepting the task she was given.

The Phoenix Champion looked satisfied.

“There is one last thing you must carry. Ofushikai,” She gestured at her obi and the pearl-encrusted sword that hung there, “and I are bound. It must come with me. But return this gift of the Heavens to my clan and it shall stand in Ofushikai’s stead, so the Phoenix know that they have been forgiven.”

The Champion held out her hand. A radiant light began to form under her fingers. The light grew brighter and brighter until Arahime had to hide her eyes from the silver glare. When she lowered her arm, the Champion held in her hand a katana, simple in appearance, with a copper saya and wrapped with orange silks. An orange tassel hung at the end. “This is Keitaku. I removed it from Midoru’s shrine when the Masters bound the Fire Dragon. It is time for it to be returned. I will pay any remaining price for my people to appease the heavens. And then we shall let a new balance be formed.” The sword lost its brilliant silver glow as Shiba passed it into Arahime’s trembling hands.

Arahime just nodded, dazzled and overwhelmed with the responsibility.

The Champion looked around the room, but could see no task remaining that had not been completed. The sky that peeked through the cracks in the dome above was beginning to brighten, though the sun had not yet risen. The sky was growing pale. “One last task for you, Little One. When these things have been returned, you must go to my sister. She has been dreaming for many years, but it is time to awaken. It is time to go home. Tell her I will wait for her there. Will you tell her this?”

“Yes, Shiba-no-kami, I will tell her.” Arahime answered, before her mind could really comprehend what she had been asked to do. She had no idea what Shiba was asking of her, knowing only that

she would try her best to do it, even if it cost her life.

Shiba Tsukimi smiled, gazing down at the young woman. “You will understand. Be wary of that gift you wear. Even Doji’s daughters can lose their way gazing at foreign stars. But I do not think it would displease her. Farewell, Little One.”

The Phoenix Champion turned away, slowly ascending the steps of the dais to the place where the shattered throne once stood. She drew Ofushikai from its saya and held it up to the growing light. As the first rays of the rising sun streaked through the cool, jungle-claimed ruined palace, its light caught on the shining steel and flashed brilliantly.

Arahime blinked. When she opened her eyes, Shiba Tsukimi was not there. A tumbling cascade of peach blossoms fell from the dais, blowing and spilling all around her and filling the tropical air with the smell of springtime...and the sea.

She was alone.

## Chapter 24

### ***Late Spring, 1237 – The Ivory Palace***

The sun had climbed even higher in the sky before Arahime stood, still dazed at what had just passed. *Had that really happened?* But there was no denying it; the satchel, blindfold, and sword lay on the ground beside her in the empty throne room.

“You never told me how to get to Second City from here...” she said aloud.

Nobody answered.

*Well. This is a problem.*

For a time, she wandered through the great palace, though she did not know what she expected to find there. Overgrown gardens bursting with flowers, empty kitchens with broken dishes and dust, decayed chambers where once a noble court walked, but no trace of the passage of other people, at least not for many years. She returned to the throne room.

Sitting down next to the spot where she had found Shiba Tsukimi amongst the vines, she rested her chin in her hands tiredly. As she had been walking, her problem became more and more apparent to her. She had food for five days. Better than being here with nothing, but not enough that she could afford to stay for long. She could strike out into the jungle to find more, but she knew, better than anyone, how dangerous the jungle could be. Her stamina had been badly damaged by her injury, and she had barely survived before. Still, the Vānara had told her she was not far from the shore and more inhabited lands. She could reach the shore. But what then?

She had been so concerned with surviving and getting to Second City, she had not considered what she would do when she got there, other than dueling Parashi. To her, it didn’t matter before: she figured that she would find out where the politics of Second City stood by speaking to the local Samurai or Heimen and then determine an approach from there. But that was before she had been entrusted with the Celestial Sword of the Phoenix and Shiba’s letters, and that changed everything.

If Zogeku had decided on conflict with the Empire, those items could be held hostage over the Phoenix. Certainly their political leverage was vast. Even a single samurai or rinjin without honor could find great glory in taking them for himself, killing her, and presenting the bequest of Shiba as given to him. It would be a great temptation to any samurai, and as for her....she was already dead. If she were slain to win such glory, no one would ever know. And her recent experiences of rinjin honor found it very wanting.

She would like to think she could defend herself against an attack, but she knew in her heart that, while she might have once, that path was not open to her any more. Any such fight would be to the death, and she had drunk far too deeply from that well not to know that it lingered near. She simply did not have the stamina needed for such an encounter. It would be a great challenge just to defeat Purashi, though one she was determined to do, no matter the cost.

That left remaining hidden until the beginning of Summer Court. She didn't know the date, exactly, but that could be some time. Even if she went directly to honorable samurai of the Phoenix, the ones to whom the sword belonged, she still could not fulfill Shiba's will. Shiba had ordered her to present herself and the sword to the Warlord on the first day of Summer Court. The Phoenix would definitely not wish to do so and would take the blade from her. She had to hide from everyone until Summer Court, but still gain entry to the Warlord's presence on the first day. In Rokugan, she had allies and friends. But here, there was no one but Doji Mushari, who might himself be dead.

Arahime buried her head in her hands, remembering the giant snake and the vast open wilderness that she had been trapped in. She had survived that, but even if she could get past the jungle between her and Second City, a jungle of politics awaited her. And that, she knew, could be just as deadly. *I don't have a single ally. What am I going to do?*

***You are Apsara, daughter of the Ikshwaku. Of course the people will protect you.*** The voice in Arahime's head, which she had dubbed Big Sister, was calm and confident.

Arahime had not tried to actively seek out the knowledge of the navrathran haar. Such gaijin magic carried risks that should not be taken lightly. But Arahime realized that even long-dead princesses might be able to help her, and this was the only tool she had left. "Big Sister?" she said aloud, her voice small in the vast throne room. "Do you know how to get to Second City from here?"

There was a pause. ***I do not know this Second City. There was no city called such that I remember.***

*That makes sense.* Arahime lifted her head. Even if she did not know specifically where she was, she knew in general that it was unlikely she was carried across the river. "What about to the river? The great river that lies to the east? Or to the sea to the south, if that is closer?"

There was a warmth in the tone of Big Sister's thoughts as she answered. ***Each year at the beginning of summer we would travel the Road of Holy Pilgrims to reach the sea to the south and make salt. The fishing villages to the south are near the mouth of the Narmada river. It is only a few days travel and is an easy road.***

The Kakita felt an initial wave of relief. It was too late in the day to start now, but at least she did not have to worry about finding food if she could get to the shore. She had seen small Ivinda fishing villages near Suitengu's Torch on their journey west. But that left the question of allies, reaching

Summer Court unnoticed, and receiving an audience with the Warlord still unresolved. But Big Sister had said...

"Which people would protect me? Would they help me?" Arahime asked the empty air.

***Our people. The Ivinda. Of course, you wear a barbarian's face, growing up in such wild lands. But if it was clear to them that you had been chosen by Lakshmi to bear the navrathran haar, that your desire was to bring prosperity and justice, then they will remember. They would not forget the Apsara so easily. You must convince them. But I may help. Do you wish me to?***

To accept help from a mysterious artifact and the woman who seemed to lie within was dangerous, and Arahime was not about to give an unqualified yes. However, no matter how she played the angles out in her mind, she could not see any other prospective allies who would have reason to protect her and take her to the Warlord. "Show me."

Big Sister offered calm affirmation. ***First, we must find a proper place to make preparations and sleep. Let us see if one of the Chambers of Bliss remains unsullied.***

Following the guidance of the the navrathran haar, Arahime went exploring deeper into the Ivory Palace, lighting a torch to venture into the darkness. Finally she reached a painted wall of rough-cut stone, similar to the stone on either side. But Big Sister pointed out two small holes in the stone. She reached in and each finger found a metal latch. When she pushed both latches at the same time, the stone loosened and she found that it rolled along a hidden track. She pushed it aside and went inside.

The chamber had been left almost untouched by the passage of time. Rich, heavy carpets covered the floor instead of tatami mats, and only a few mice had been able to chew at the edges. She lit the lanterns that hung from brackets on the walls and extinguished her torch. A large teak and gold cage filled one corner of the room, though she felt Big Sister's amusement as she told her it was a bed. Exploring the cabinets in the cage, Arahime found a large, very soft futon that had been stored away in a box made of cedar. After so many months of sleeping on rushes under a coconut fiber blanket, the softness of the futon was heavenly.

A finely painted stand held a basin and pitcher for water, along with a low, padded stool and a large round mirror. Arahime knelt down to look at herself for the first time in many months. Her hair had grown much longer, but the humidity had made it curl as much as her father's. She was thinner, her skin pale due to the change in her diet and the time that she had been hidden out of the sun as she recovered; all the darkening of her skin from her days aboard the boat was gone. There were red pocks where the biting insects had demanded their share. The clothes she wore, the Ivindi garments, were, miraculously, only stained and not torn from her journey through the jungle. Her gray eyes were tired. *It's a good thing Harun can't see me like this. He'd be horrified.* She smiled to herself, knowing that that was a lie. Harun wouldn't care about little things like that. She was alive, and that was really what counted.

***You will need to look like an Apsara. You have a barbaric beauty about you, Little Sister, but wearing the sari is insufficient. Most will not have seen the navrathran haar to recognize it. You must pierce your ears and nose to show your favored daughter status. You are not a concubine, after all.***

Arahime's eyes widened and she covered her nose with her hands protectively. "My nose?!" she squeaked. As a bushi, of course she'd seen duelists who had suffered far greater injuries to their faces in the cause of serving their lord, and such was a sacrifice that all had been instructed to expect. And she had heard of piercing the ears as courtiers do. But...

***Of course. Only the daughters of a true wife are permitted to wear the Nath.***

It was a small enough injury, and Arahime had become well versed in purifying her wounds. She had to laugh a little at the idea of marching into Summer Court looking far more gaijin than any rinjin ever had. Once her mother told her the story of a crow that stole the feathers of an eagle to take a message from Shinsei up to Tengoku for him. If a Crow can disguise himself as an Eagle, surely a Crane could disguise herself as a Peacock for a time in order to carry her own message to the Phoenix.

"Very well. What do I do?"

***First...we wash. You are filthy, Wild Princess. Let us seek out some water.***

## Chapter 25

### ***Late Spring, 1237 – Suitengu's Torch***

Prateet Dalai was no ordinary fisherman. In the village of Vadavannur, a moonless light like this would never find the other fisherman out on the streets. It had been different long ago. In the distant past, the village of Vadavannur would play host to music and dancing in the cool evenings, when everyone would congregate outdoors to smoke and drink and dance and love and gossip and talk about the latest catch. Parades of visitors and noblemen would come to their shores to enjoy the blessings of the sea. But then the ruhmalites came, and brought death with them, killing every man, woman, and child in the village. Only those who had been out on the boats at the time were spared. Now, the men and women of Vadavannur stayed inside at night and watched the jungle carefully. If they spoke of it at all, it was to speak in hushed tones of the glories of the distant past and the ghosts of ancient kings that walked the broken stone roadway into the sultry darkness. Each year the stories of the past grew fewer, glories forgotten. They knew little of true fear any more.

Prateet Dalai was not like them. His family had lived in Second City for generations, far more urbane and sophisticated than these simple villagers. His parents were poor, and life was difficult growing up in a land decimated by the cultists of Kali-ma there in the city. Poor, but they survived. When the strangers came, they adapted. They lived through the chaos of the conquerors and the purges. The strangers went insane, slaughtering each other and anyone within reach in the streets. But then came the Dark Naga, sweeping all before them. It was too much. Prateet's father fled to this tiny fishing village, far from the strangers and their deadly blades and the city's madness. It was hard to adapt once again to a new craft, but it was peaceful. These villagers were frightened of ghosts and memories. But not Prateet. He had faced true fear, and was never afraid. He still had family in Second City. He remembered how his father's cousin Sadhu always smiled when he handed him a sweet roll. He hoped they were well. He hoped Sadhu smiled still.

It cost much lamp oil to mend nets at night. But a fisherman who could do so could reach the fishing grounds first and bring back the biggest catch. Prateet found the great lighthouse more than sufficient to give him light for mending his nets. So each night he would carry one of his nets into the the Lighthouse's glow to mend for several hours before returning home to sleep. He did not venture near the strangers who guarded the lighthouse, of course. They were more trouble than they were worth. But they did not bother him or his nets.

The other fishermen were too superstitious to follow. Each night his travels would take him up to the foot of the stone steps, that overgrown, grim pathway that climbed into the mountains. The villagers said death came from that road, that there lay the ghosts of the maharajah and the Ivory Court. It was there that the people of Ivinda were slaughtered by the cultists and from there that the terrors of Kali-Ma emerged. That was a long time ago, and Prateet had seen the Dark Naga in Second City. The steps held little terror for him.

Still, the jungle was very quiet tonight, and the road was dark. Prateet was climbing the small ridge that led to the base of the steps, and the dark jungle cliffs loomed over him with the weight of time and story. Even the insects chose not to sing. *I am no superstitious bumpkin*, he told himself, and pushed on.

He reached the stone tiles of the base, the path up a crack leading further into darkness. Around him were shrines to appease the angry spirits and warnings to venture no further, but his path went back down into the village of Vadavannur. Prateet was no village fool...he reached the center and turned to look up the path into the mountains.

At first, it was a glimmer, but it quickly grew brighter and brighter as he watched until it became like its own silver star. As the light grew closer, Prateet's jaw dropped as the truth was revealed. What he had thought a star was a woman, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her sari of white and gold shone like the moonlight on the crest of an ocean wave. Her slender waist was encircled with gold and jewels, and gold and jewels ornamented her wrists and ankles. A fine white veil disguised her face and hid her eyes, but he could see her ruby lips and the delicate ring and chain that ran from her nose up behind the snowy veil which covered hair of purest white. In one hand, she carried a silver lantern, the source of her light. On her back, she carried a pair of swords, though they were hard to make out in the darkness.

He was more amazed than frightened, involuntarily taking a step towards her. "Lady..." he offered, not sure what to call her. "Are you of earth or of heaven?"

Those lovely lips curled in a small, sad smile. "Bound to earth, I bear a message from heaven." She spoke in perfect Ivindi. "I offer story and memory to your people. All I ask in exchange is help delivering that message. The samurai must not know. Please take me to your headman."

Prateet pressed his hands together and bowed. "Follow me, Lady." Ghost of the Maharajahs or Spirit of the Wind or mortal woman, Prateet was not afraid. He was not like other men.

## Chapter 26

### ***The First Day of Summer Court, 1237 – Second City***

*There is some satisfaction in seeing them squirm*, Kakita Kousuda decided, watching the court assemble. It had likely been many years since Second City had seen a Summer Court like this. Not since before the wars with the Onyx, at the very least. A pair each of the Jade and Emerald Magistrates, at least four members of the Brotherhood of Shinsei. Representatives of all of the other clans of the Empire were there; and at least twelve Daidoji along with five courtiers, two artisans, an Asahina shugenja, and a Kenshinzen representing the Crane. The invitations had been extended personally by the Warlord, but it had been years since Zogeku had seen anything of the like.

Part of him, the sane, rational, level-headed part, was surprised that there was such a huge response to the death of one yojimbo. The rational part had learned quickly since he arrived that conflict with Zogeku had been brewing for years, that the anger of the younger Zogeki towards the Empire was coming to a head, and without the timeless bonds of tradition to tie them, the Warlord's rule was coming into question. He had summoned the Empire more to strengthen his own hand against a possible rebellion as to investigate and apologize for the death of a young samurai-ko.

The other part of him, the part of him that wanted to ride a horse into battle and start taking heads and scream battlecries to the uncaring skies, swore that no response on heaven or earth could ever be enough to avenge the death of his only daughter. He would use every tool at his disposal: wit, coin, ally, or steel, to bring Zogeku and everyone in it to its knees.

He might honey his words with sweet reason, offer calm sympathies and hopes for accommodation. He might see all sides and offer to do his best to negotiate between them. But when the Zogeku treasurer was forced to make a full accounting of every Crane koku in the hands of the Arashi samurai for a formal re-evaluation of the currency, the once-Ide could recognize a Kahn's triumphant ride around the camp. And when the treasurer was forced to admit before the entire court that Crane koku made up over sixty percent of their currency, there was a certain satisfaction in knowing he could set the colonies ablaze.

And he would do it...for the sake of the Crane, but more for the sake of his daughter. He had been ready to burn down one Empire to avenge the death of a woman he loved. He could burn down another.

But first, the formalities. The parade of those offering their gifts to the Warlord was already long. The gifts were less personal and less reverent than those he had seen in the court of the Emperor. But to his trained eye, it was clear many of the gifts were made with purpose: showcasing the glories of the Empire vs the power of the Colonies. When his turn came, a servant carried a fine painting covered in cloth. The servant set it on its stand and retreated. Kakita Kousuda approached and bowed to the Warlord. For he too had a role to play in this.



“Honored Warlord. Almost twenty years ago, a great Winter Court was held at Kuyden Mirumoto that I had the privilege of attending. During that court, through my art I won the privilege of meeting with the Warlord of Zogeku, the man from whom your family name is drawn. Arashi. We discussed many things. He taught me just how far Will could carry me, and its costs. And he told me a tale of a man who loved the Thunder, and whom the Thunder loved in return. Five years after we parted ways, I was in Otosan Uchi at Winter Court lobbying for his cause when the lover of the Thunder Dragon was declared the Fortune of Will. The Emperor is great, and Tengoku heeds his word. I am glad that Warlord Arashi’s story was able to find a peaceful end. It is in his memory and in the memory of my daughter, who turned four that Winter Court, then, that I bring to you this painting of my own creation, a depiction of the Thunder Dragon and Yoritomo, Fortune of Will.”

Kousuda stripped away the cloth covering the painting. There was a small gasp from some of the older courtiers. On it was a painting of the Thunder Dragon, true, glorious in her power with lightening in her mane. But while the image of her lover was powerful and muscular, he was also old, with one hand shriveled and twisted. His face was handsome, but tired. He wore the traditional garments associated with the Champion of the Mantis, but did not carry the kama. Only an artist who had seen that face would paint it so well, but those who had seen it would never forget. It was the face of Yoritomo. The face of Arashi.

He bowed again and stepped back away as the Warlord’s cool, evaluating eyes followed him back to his place.

*Yes. I know. And you know what I did for him. I will not let you forget.*

Kousuda felt a presence at his shoulder. He turned to face Arashi Seiho. He was dressed formally in a kimono of gold and teal, his long hair neatly tied back and a serious expression in his gaijin eyes. The Arashi gave a courtly bow. “Yours is a formidable talent, to capture such a likeness, Kakita-san. You do my ancestor honor.”

His graceful manners and polite words would fool most, but not the trained gaze of an Ide. The grandson of the warlord held a heart impatient and lusting for power, for a control over his world that he had not yet achieved.

“Arashi was an impressive man. I wonder what he would think of this new kingdom your grandfathers have created in his name.” Kousuda kept his tone warm and cordial. *I know you had something to do with my daughter’s death. I will have every word of it out of you soon enough.*

Seiho made a gesture to the throneroom. “A shining court, with gifts for my grandfather from throughout the Empire and the lands beyond, offering him homage. I am certain the Fortune who carved a Kingdom out of a gang of pirates through the power of his will would

approve.”

“If you had met him as I had, if you had understood the strength and cost of what his Will put into motion as he knew them, you would not be so quick to count this as success. But perhaps you aspire to more, Seiho-san? You are young, and wait only for your grandfather’s death when all will bring their gifts to you. Would the descendant of Will be satisfied with this?”

Seiho’s eyes looked up at the rinjin throne upon which his grandfather sat, and Kousuda could see the hunger. “Nothing is certain yet. My grandfather speaks of paths other than heredity to pass the title of Warlord between the generations. Of passing the decision to the heads of all the houses, a bunch of withered old trees, even if their roots are deep. But I am sure he will see wisdom eventually. A kingdom, like a tree, cannot grow if it looks for green shoots among the almost dead.”

“That sounds more like ambition than will to me. You should offer your prayers at the Shrine of Yoritomo, I think.”

“My prayers would never be for myself, Kakita-san. My ambitions and my will lie solely with the advancement of Zogeku.”

“And if you gain, also, such are the rewards of ambition and will. I have tasted such sweetness myself, and been warded against. Pray harder, Seiho-san, for while such things have virtue, Yoritomo-no-kami serves to remind us that they also bear a cost. Who have you sacrificed to your will?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, Kakita-san.”

The Crane who was once Unicorn let the edge of the scimitar gleam in his carefully selected words. “May Yoritomo-no-kami guide you, Seiho-san. I know he remembers what it was like to fall so terribly, terribly far.” He gave the Arashi a curt bow and walked away. *I will see you beg*, he thought to himself. *Beg for mercy, and wish my daughter were still here to grant it.*

The First Day ceremonies were wrapping up and Kakita Kousuda was turning to leave when his path was intercepted by a shorter man with green eyes and reddish hair streaked with white. At his side, a tall, lean woman stood, dressed in a fine kimono but standing as if she would prefer to be in armor. He recognized the pair at once and bowed deeply. “Morishita-san...both of you. It has been many years. I am glad to see that you are both looking so well.”

The Lord of House Morishita started to grumble something irascible, but his wife laid a hand

on his shoulder and answered. "It is good to see you again, Kousuda-san. I am just sorry it is under these circumstances. How is your wife taking it? It must be difficult to have to go so quickly from grieving the loss of your daughter to standing as the Voice of the Emperor."

Kousuda closed his eyes for a moment, recalling vividly the moment that Kyoumi found out of Arahime's death, her wrenching sorrow....and how Hida Kozen had come to them not two days after to tell them of his retirement.

---

*"The Void has spoken. It is time." The older Hida's hair was iron gray, his face still well-masked under his facepaint. Kousuda had poured them tea, for Kyoumi and Kozen. Despite the years they had known each other, each, he found, still had their mysteries, even from him. "Toshi Ranbo has fallen. The Land has been cleansed. Kanpeki is dead and Yuhmi hides in the recesses of Shinomen Mori. The Heavens have not yet returned their favor, but we must start. It will take a different voice than mine now. The Empire must be rebuilt. Do you have the words?"*

*His wife was dressed in the white of mourning, her face composed and still. He knew how she had screamed and wept and pleaded and raged over the previous two days, hidden in the privacy of their own chambers. But now she had emerged at the Voice's request, balancing her emotions on the point of a knife. "I have the words, Kozen-sama, if the Emperor pleases." Kyoumi said simply. "I have known the words for a long time. But words of renewal sound shallow to those who have suffered great loss. Now..." she paused for a moment, letting the pain seep into her voice just enough. "Now I understand how to say them."*

*The Ishinken looked at her for a very long time, his eyes dark and intense as the void between the stars. After the interminable silence, he dipped his head slightly. "You do."*

---

"Kozen-sama knew what was best," Kousuda answered. "I am certain that..."

Suddenly there was a commotion from the back of the throne room, and the Ide could hear excited shouts in several tongues coming from the streets outside. Two of the guards hurried from near the Warlord to join their fellows at the door, and most of the visitors to the Summer Court broke off their conversations to see what was happening. As the Morishitas turned away, Kousuda raised his fan.

One of the guards returned from the back to the dias and bowed deeply to the Warlord. "Arashi-sama!" The Warlord frowned and nodded, so the guard continued. "The Ivindi natives have entered your district. They claim that a messenger of the heavens has come with a message for your Court. They will not quiet themselves or leave until you have agreed to allow this messenger to come and be presented to you."

Whispers and speculation hummed through the court. During his time here, Kousuda had learned that, overall, the Rinjin treated the Ivindi natives with respect, and while the Ivindi still held the status of heimen, even marriages between the Ivindi and their Rinjin rulers were not uncommon. Therefore it did not surprise him when the Warlord answered, with measured tone. "Tell them that I will accept the presentation of this 'messenger', though the mercy of my response will depend entirely on their actions and the actions their messenger."

The guard bowed deeply again and left.

About ten minutes later, the great doors were opened and the guards announced simply, "The messenger has arrived."

Four well-dressed Ivindi villagers entered, two flanking each side of the Messenger. A hush fell over the courtroom as the guests of the warlord stopped to stare.

The messenger was a beautiful woman dressed in strange, Ivindi garments of white and gold: a fitted top that left her belly exposed, and a long, flowing skirt that draped over one shoulder, held in place with decorative broaches somewhat similar to those of the rinjin courtiers. Her ankles sparkled with jewels, and rings on several of her fingers connected with chains to the glittering bracelets on her wrists. A golden and begemmed belt encircled her slender waist, and Kousuda noticed immediately with surprise that that belt held a peace-bound wakizashi. He raised an eyebrow. A white veil held in place with a circlet of gold hid the woman's face completely. On her back, the messenger carried a pair of peace-bound katana, and over her shoulder, a wood and cloth prayer satchel. Her hands were folded in front of her.

Although he could not see her face, Kakita Kousuda felt an odd feeling of familiarity, increased as he felt her turn to glance in his direction as she passed. But she did not stop to speak to him, instead accepting the questioning gaze of all as she approached the Warlord's throne.

The four Ivindi with her threw themselves down before the Warlord in humble supplication.

The Messenger stopped amongst them, and more slowly, performed the proper bow of a samurai to the lord of a foreign land, just as he had when he presented his gift.

Arashi Seiho, standing by his grandfather, cast an appreciative gaze over her form.

The Warlord acknowledged the bow seriously with a nod of his head.

The Messenger straightened and raised her left hand to lift away the veil that had hidden her face.

A gasp rippled through the courtroom. Curly white hair spilled about the woman's shoulders. Arashi Seiho choked and grew pale. Kakita Kousuda sidled along the edge of the court to

where he could see her face.

She spoke. "Lord Arashi, Warlord of Zogeku. I have been welcomed by your court before, and so I come again. For my gift, I offer this." She offered up a small, folded piece of red fabric. "This is the blindfold of Shiba Tsukimi, Champion of the Phoenix Clan, and chosen of Shiba, granted to me that I might give to you to prove to you my message is true. I present this to you."

Whispers broke out again. The ex-Ide heard a stir among the small delegation from the Phoenix. But he ignored them as his heart started quickening in his chest. *I know that voice...It can't be...* He pushed past a plump Tenmei with an apologetic bow. *There.*

*It's her. It is really her. She is alive!*

*Arahime.*

He recognized her, but he could see others did not; she had changed so much. Her hair was longer and curlier than he remembered, and she had lost weight and muscle. More surprisingly, her ears were pierced and she wore long, dangling earrings, and a fine gold nose ring pierced her left nostril and was attached by a fine chain up above her ear. He was used to interacting with gaijin, but even he found the nose ring barbaric. She wore a large collar and neckace of ivory, emeralds, jade, and pearl: more jewels than he had seen on the wife of the Emperor. Barbaric or not...his daughter was alive. She was beautiful.

The Warlord inclined his head in acceptance of the gift and a tacit acknowledgement that she might speak.

Kakita Arahime turned to face the court. "I come with a message. But first, I must declare myself." She tilted her head up proudly, as though her strange garb was the finest court kimono. "My name is Kakita Arahime, Daughter of Kakita Kyoumi and Kakita Kousuda, Graduate of the Kakita Academy and Yojimbo to the Ambassador of the Crane, Doji Mushari." Her gray eyes flicked across the hall to land a glance on the Crane ambassador, who, though he kept his On well, seemed almost on the verge of tears with joy at seeing her.

More murmurs. Fans were quickly raised. Many of those present were only here because of the events set into motion at the death of his daughter. To see her here, alive, changed everything. To one side, slightly behind and to the right of Arashi Seiho, Kousuda saw a tall, muscular bushi start backing quietly away from the throne. A look of calculation weighed on the face of the grandson of the Warlord's face. He made a signal to the guards to secure the doors, preventing anyone from entering or leaving. The muscular bushi stopped.

Arahime turned back towards the Warlord. "Lord Arashi. While I travelled with Ambassador Mushari off the coast of the Unknown Lands, a bushi known to you used secret correspondences from within your family to draw me out, playing against the false statements that had been made to shame me. He then struck from behind to throw me overboard. I am certain that he intended to murder me, leaving me to drown, or killed by the

crocodiles that infested those waters. But I did not drown. Through the blessings of the Heavens, and the goodness of the native inhabitants of this land, I have lived to return. In my journey here, I was fortunate to meet Shiba Tsukimi, Champion of the Phoenix, and was asked to carry a message for her. That brings me back to this place.”

The Warlord gestured with his hand. “You may deliver your message, Kakita Arahime.”

The young woman turned back to face the assembled court. “This is the message I bear. Shiba Tsukimi is dead. She was in self-imposed exile at the Ivory Palace where once the Maharaja held their seat. I was with her until the very end. For these past years, she has walked the Path of Man, waiting for the time when the Phoenix clan would be redeemed.”

The tiny Phoenix delegation, led by the Phoenix Ambassador, Asako Sozen, watched her, frozen, scanning every inch for any sign of deception. One of the two Emerald Magistrates present was also Phoenix, a Shiba by his mons, as was one of the Jade magistrates, an Isawa. “We must see the blindfold,” Sozen answered her, his face impassive.

One of the Warlord’s aides carried the blindfold Arahime had presented over to the Phoenix ambassador, who studied it carefully. He passed it back to have it presented to the others when he answered Arahime. “Go on.”

“Before the end, as Shiba Tsukimi receded into oneness with the blade Ofushikai, I saw the strength of Shiba made manifest through her. And through her, he gave me this message. He told me that he loves and cares for his people, but that the influence of Tengoku must be diminished within Ningen-do if Jigoku’s power is to be reduced. He said the Phoenix would be forgiven, that he would take upon himself the remaining price for his children’s sins.” She paused. “He will listen to the prayers of the Phoenix.”

There was silence through the whole court. Either the young Crane spoke truly, or it was the most brazen story they had ever heard.

Arahime walked down the length of the court to stand before the pair of Emerald Magistrates that had been sent by the Emerald Champion, Kakita Karasu, to attend this court. One was a Lion, the other, Kousuda had seen, was Phoenix. Shiba. Arahime bowed deeply to the Emerald magistrates and held up to the Shiba magistrate the satchel she carried.

“I am not worthy to present this to the Phoenix, Magistrate-sama, but I have been given this message to bear. Within are the wishes of Shiba Tsukimi, Champion of the Line of Shiba, for the future leadership of her clan. I have not read what her wishes are, but I entrust to the Emperor and the Emerald Champion the proper distribution of Shiba-no-Kami’s will.”

The Phoenix magistrate looked puzzled, but serious as he accepted the satchel. The Lion Emerald magistrate examined the seal. “The seal is untouched. It could be true, Ryobe-san.” She turned back to look at Arahime for more information, but Arahime bowed again and withdrew.

The Kakita then turned towards the small group of monks from the Brotherhood of Shinsei, and again bowed deeply before them, far deeper than might seem to befit monks of their station. She removed from her back the orange-saya'ed blade and held it up, presenting it to the highest ranking member of the group. "Shiba said I was to deliver this to you, that I was to entrust to the Brotherhood of Shinsei the future of his Clan. This is the Celestial Sword of the Phoenix, Keitaku. Ofushikai, the Sword of the Phoenix, Shiba took with him to the Celestial Heavens. But Shiba Tsukimi took this from the Shrine of Shiba Midoru when the Elemental Masters committed their heresy. It is to be returned now to the Brotherhood, to be given to the future Champion."

The older monk, dressed in saffron robes, shaved bald, his skin as dark as walnut, bowed as he accepted the blade. "Your words are sincere," he answered, "Even if your story stretches the bounds of my understanding. We thank you for bringing this to us." The older monk then turned, holding out the blade to a younger monk, perhaps in his mid-forties, lean and healthy with dark, intelligent eyes. "Brother Ishi?"

The younger monk, Brother Ishi, bowed, his dark eyes evaluating the sword and the young woman who had carried it.

"Hai, brother Juzo?"

"You hold the memories of a man named Isawa Shunryu, a man who would know more about these matters than any other. Does the Crane girl speak truthfully?"

Brother Ishi spoke softly, though all ears in the court strained to hear. "Shiba-no-kami has left Ningen-do. Shiba Tsukimi was at the Ivory Palace, walking the Path of Man. She is now gone to us, her spirit joined with Shiba in Ofushikai in Tengoku. And this," he held out his hand to touch the blade, "Is the Celestial Sword of the Phoenix, Keitaku."

At his touch, a bright silver light flashed around the blade, creating the form of a brilliant phoenix of white fire. The light shone for a moment, then disappeared when the young monk withdrew his hand. Kousuda could still see the image blazing behind his eyelids every time he blinked.

His daughter bowed again to the monks and finally turned back towards the Warlord. Kousuda could feel the presence at his shoulder of Doji Sawao, the Kenshinzen the Crane had brought with the delegation to deal with any 'differences of interpretation' that might arise during their investigation. The tall, lean man had a gaunt face and a dour, unsmiling expression. He leaned in close. "Watch that one." He gestured with his chin towards the bushi Kousuda had noticed earlier trying to make his way towards the doors.

Arahime approached the Warlord again, bowing. "Thank you for allowing me to deliver this message. And thanks to these Ivindi who have enabled me to bring it before you."

The Ivindi who had entered straightened. One of them, the most finely dressed, answered, "These were not the messages we had hoped for, Apsara. But you have repaid us well in

granting what would otherwise have been lost. We will take our leave. Vishnu protect you.” The four Ivindi bowed deeply, and, walking backwards, moved towards the entrance and disappeared beyond the main doors of the Court. The guards allowed them to pass.

The Warlord raised an eyebrow, though he held his face otherwise impassive. “There was one other issue, I believe,” he said in a dark tone.

Arahime straightened and tilted her chin up. “There is. I accuse Purashi of the Arashi family of attempted murder, and will have the truth from his lips of who ordered him to do so, and I uphold the sincerity of my claim with this blade. She pivoted slightly to face the bushi that had been trying to slip out. “You are no longer on a ship, and can no longer strike by deception, at night. You insulted my school before. Now face it in the harsh light of day. I challenge you. I know Arashi Seiho spread lies and deception about me in the court. Did he put you up to this?”

Seiho jumped in with an explanation. “I was the one that had the doors locked so no one could leave! I prevented him from escaping! Would I have done that if I had colluded with him? Yes, in my envy and fear that your beauty would not be mine, I may have claimed things I should not have. But Purashi’s plans were his own. I had nothing to do with it!”

Kousuda could see a ripple of fans being raised among some of the younger rinjin of the court. *Oh...did he turn on his own to save his own skin? I wonder what his followers think of that.*

Arahime’s gray eyes passed coolly over Seiho to land on the bushi that Kousuda had seen trying to leave earlier. Purashi seemed to be weighing his options thoughtfully for a second, then, for his part, stepped forward boldly into the middle of the room, and shouted, his voice carrying through the whole chamber.

“Lies! Every word that has come from this woman’s mouth has been lies. Who knows how long or who she has worked with to make this deception happen? Clearly this has been a plot to subvert the Phoenix, now when they are at their weakest. Probably by the Crane, but maybe the Kolat or even some Ivindi conspiracy. Now all she needs is someone to take the blame for it. She picked me because I insulted her school once long ago. She wants to challenge me? I say that this heresy must not fester any longer. I accept your duel...right here. Right now. To the death. If your words were true, you wouldn’t be afraid to defend them. But since they’re false, I’m not going to give you time to spread your lies.”

Doji Sawao scowled and said softly, “I was afraid of that. He noticed the injury...he knows she’s hurt. Probably tired and worn just by trying to get through the doors, not to mention she’s wearing that strange costume. He wants to duel her now, half-starved and wounded, before she can rest or have a shugenja take a look at her.”

Kousuda cursed himself for not noticing earlier. Now that Sawao had pointed it out, he could see that, though she masked it very well, her left shoulder moved oddly. He was not trained as Sawao was in looking for such weaknesses. Sawao took a half-step forward to intervene.



“As you wish,” Arahime answered boldly. She turned to the Crane delegation, and to Doji Mushari in particular, for permission.

*Oh, Wildflower...this is not the time to be brash...* Kousuda hurried towards Mushari, to try to stop him from granting permission. Sawao followed.

For his part, Purashi turned to the Warlord for his own permission. The Warlord scowled, about to refuse, but he scanned the crowd. Kousuda could see a discontented muttering among the younger members of his court, in particular, and even among some of the Rokugani who were having difficulty believing the Crane girl’s incredible tale. He nodded once.

Kousuda closed on Mushari. “You cannot give permission for this. Not now,” he whispered behind his fan. “She’s hurt. Who knows what she has been through? She needs time to rest, to see a healer, before she is ready for a duel.”

The tired eyes of Doji Mushari scanned the crowd and settled on the Warlord. He sighed. “He gives permission because he knows if he does not, once word spreads in the streets that he favors the people of Rokugan over the people of Zogeku, he might have open rebellion on his hands. Who knows who the Ivindi will support in such a clash?” He sighed. “If I do not give permission, then word will spread out from here along with Pushari’s accusations. There will be doubt on the truth of those documents and the message she carries. Even the slightest doubt among the samurai will taint the efforts of the Phoenix to try to restructure their clan. Arahime must prove what she says is true beyond all shadow of doubt, and she must do so before the lies are spread about her, and more importantly, about Shiba’s will. I must grant permission. And she must win.”

Mushari lowered his fan and signaled his agreement to the duel. “May Kakita bless your blade, Arahime-san.”

Kakita Arahime bowed to Doji Mushari. Her eyes locked with her father’s one last time. He could see in the stormy gray a hundred, perhaps a thousand stories that needed to be told, and prayed with all his heart that she would live so he could hear them. “Men will lie to you. Your eyes will deceive you. Steel never lies, nor deceives, nor hides bitter reality. In the sword, you can find truth.” She quoted Kakita’s The Sword. “I knew this would come. Yu’genta, please forgive me.”

The Warlord stepped forward. “Keep all the doors to the Palace sealed. No one is to enter or leave until after the duel is complete. Prepare the sacred circle.”

A pair of shugenja, the plump Tenmei Kousuda had circumvented earlier and a brown haired Morishita, prepared a sacred circle of salt in the open courtyard nearby. More lanterns were

lit, flooding the courtyard with brightness. Extra guards were posted on the doors and prevented egress by all. Purashi, his face fierce with determination, stripped down to his hakama, exposing the powerfully muscular chest and rippling biceps of a Mantis-trained bushi. Arahime moved more slowly. She loosened and unwound the top part of the sari, then drew it up between her legs similar to a loosely-tied mawashi such as sumo wrestlers wear. The last twist encircled her waist like an obi, and it was into this that she slid her daisho. Her fitted top covered her to the measure of decency, but little beyond. She stripped off some of the jewels and the small, embroidered shoes she wore, setting them into her father's hands. She accepted a drink of water, and then it was time.

Arahime stepped into the ring. Purashi did likewise.

"I have never dueled a half-naked barbarian woman before," Purashi joked as he entered the sacred circle.

"How unfortunate for you. I, on the other hand, have dueled several ignorant braggarts," Arahime answered drily.

The master sensei of the Arashi dojo stepped forward to adjudicate the duel. "According to the sacred custom of both the Empire and Zogeku, we stand in contest to prove in steel the truth in the words of Kakita Arahime and the guilt of Arashi Purashi in this matter. May the heavens profess their justice."

Arashi Purashi adopted the wide, squat stance of the Mantis, with a low center of gravity and plenty of power. Arahime turned to the side, presenting a narrow target, her hand resting lightly on her blade. The scent of hibiscus was almost overwhelming in the heat-drenched evening.

Their eyes locked across the ring.

"You're weak. Everyone can see that. How long since you trained properly, Arahime? A year? Not with those fancy clothes."

Arahime's tone was calm, even serene, as she answered, "I only have to hit...once." *The words of the Crane Thunder*, Kousuda thought. *How did the original Kakita feel as he heard those words from his daughter?*

"If you seek a perfect cut, I'll hit you with a dozen perfectly acceptable ones." Purashi's thumb inched his blade loose in the saya.

Arahime did not answer, her hands in place, letting the moment stretch out between them. Kousuda held his breath.

Everything moved so quickly from there that Kousuda could not really see what had happened. His daughter had drawn and stepped forward to one side in a low sweep out, then twisted the blade up to intercept Purashi's powerful strike which cut downwards towards her from the much taller man. He struck her, though her sword and her footwork

deflected much of the power of the blow from her neck to her left arm. A gush of blood streamed down, leaving a gaping wound, but she was still standing.

From there, her style became completely defensive, backing away and avoiding the rinjin's strikes. Kousuda's heart was in his throat, knowing that, twice-injured as she was, if she continued to fight on the defense she would quickly reach exhaustion. A second blow would surely kill her. Her face was pale and tense, and she looked as if she could collapse from weariness at any moment.

Strangely, the Kenshinzen beside him seemed perfectly relaxed after that first blow, watching the duel go on calmly, and only tensing slightly when Purashi's blade fell a little near the smaller woman. But before Kousuda could ask why, a shrill shout erupted from the rinjin opposite the Crane on the other side of the dueling ring. A flood of blood, which had previously been unseen because it was soaking through Purashi's dark green hakama, came gushing down the man's leg. He stumbled in the sudden pool formed of his own blood, but managed to recover.

In that second, Arahime whirled, coming back with another low strike. She had slowed enough that this one, Kousuda could actually see. The sword tip penetrated the back of Purashi's other knee, tearing through the hakama. As the rinjin fell, two arterial sprays erupted from the seemingly two small cuts made by the blade of Kakita Masarugi, one to each femoral artery. Arahime stumbled back, her blade drawn and guarding the fallen man closely, but Purashi did not arise.

He had bled out in less than a minute.

As the healers rushed forward to tend the girl's wounds, as the gasps of the younger rinjin turned into excuses and flight, as the Phoenix swarmed around the Emerald magistrate, eager to find out when their future would be revealed to them, and the other Crane courtiers began quickly leveraging this new victory into advantage for the clan...Kousuda's eyes were for none of them.

His eyes were for his daughter, alone.

Arahime was back. Everything had changed.

And he would never allow her to be abandoned again.

[Fin]

