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HERETIC
Betrayers
of kamigawa

KAMIGAWA CYCLE • BOOK II

Scott McGough

To save a kingdom, he must betray its king.

Toshi Umezawa has never been a particularly religious man. Nor has he particularly cared about the affairs of others. The path of the errant ronin has ever been a solitary one, and he is as surprised as any when the dangerous attentions of the myojin, a princess, and the moon folk all involved in a secret the daimyo would kill to protect would change all that. And amid all the confusion, the attacks of the kami against the daimyo's kingdom, and against Toshi himself, are getting worse.

Scott McGough continues an epic story of a ronin and a princess and the strange turns their unlikely alliance takes as they attempt to discover the truth behind the kami's war.

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Kamigawa Cycle · Book II

HERETIC

traitors

of kamigawa

Scott McGough



PART ONE



PRAYERS FOR A WINTER NIGHT

*Softly falls the snow
Blanketing fears, stilling hearts
Sleep, carry me home*

All Towabara was abuzz. For the first time in years, Daimyo Konda would address his subjects directly from the steps of his mighty tower. The official proclamations were vague as to the content of this address, but they were very clear about its importance. Any able-bodied adult who did not attend would be called before the daimyo's feared civil enforcers, his *go-yo* squads, to explain why.

On the eve of the address, four armed soldiers retrieved Lady Pearl-Ear of the *kitsunebito* from her cell in the tower's upper chambers. They surrounded the small fox-woman as they marched down to ground level, but they always kept a respectful distance. If not for the clank of heavy iron chains around her wrists and ankles, the silent retainers would have seemed more an honor guard than jailers.

Pearl-Ear herself remained stoic and inscrutable, her wide eyes calm and her short-muzzled face held high. The chains did not noticeably hamper her graceful movements, though she was thin-boned and delicate under her white robes and pale gray fur. She furrowed her brow in annoyance when the metal links audibly scraped against one another, but otherwise she gave no sign that she was even aware of her bonds.

The gate sentries saw the strange procession coming and opened the outer door. The sky above the courtyard was a dull, dusty yellow, and a stifling haze had descended. In the shadow of the great tower, the air was cool but stale, and it pressed on Pearl-Ear like a wet canvas.

Her escorts led the way to a larger collection of Konda's retainers in their finest dress uniforms. Pearl-Ear, who had been a member of the daimyo's court for more than twenty years, recognized none of the soldiers she saw. No surprise there: Konda was unlikely to assign watchdog duty to any soldier who knew and might sympathize with her. Although this was merely more evidence of her sad fall from the daimyo's good graces, Pearl-Ear reserved her pity for the soldiers themselves.

The Kami War had taken a heavy toll on all of Kamigawa, but it was the daimyo's retainers who had paid most dearly and most often. Of the thousands of soldiers assembled, Pearl-Ear calculated that more than a third had no military experience whatsoever and had been recruited simply to maintain the ranks.

Eiganjo Fortress included the tower and the walled courtyard around it. It functioned as a small city where civilian merchants and artisans conducted business alongside billeted soldiers and officers of the daimyo's army. Farmers, tourists, and foreign dignitaries came and went on a daily basis. In better times, there was a constant flow of goods and people to and from the tower.

After twenty years of war, Eiganjo was not so much a fortress as a last safe haven. Daimyo Konda's citizens and retainers lived crammed behind the tower walls like

refugees. The only movement now was one way, into the city, then into the ranks of the daimyo's army. There was a massive stable at the far end of the compound, currently half-empty. The vast expanse of arable plains to the north was barren, its fields either fallow or victims of assaults from the spirit realm.

Pearl-Ear straightened her back, struggling to keep her face from reflecting the misery she felt around her. The mighty walls of Eiganjo had become as much of a prison to the daimyo's people as they were to her.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom and the haze, Pearl-Ear continued to hold her head high. Two decades of marauding spirits had reduced a once-thriving population to the haggard throng now assembled outside the tower gates. Where Konda had once been master of a realm that covered most of the continent and bordered on every other powerful lord's domain, now his entire kingdom was easily contained inside a single fortress. A nation of almost a quarter million had been reduced to well under a hundred thousand. The rest had either fallen to marauding kami or had fled when it became clear that Konda's kingdom was the front line of the war between the *kakuriyo* spirit world and the *utsushiyo* human one. Most of those who remained were now waiting outside the tower. Even Pearl-Ear, the disgraced former tutor of the daimyo's daughter, was mustered out for Konda's address.

Pearl-Ear craned her head back and tried to see to the tower's highest window, looking for any sign of Princess Michiko. The sulfurous haze prevented her, and she blinked away tears as she lowered her gaze. If she herself was obliged to attend the daimyo's address, wouldn't Michiko? Wouldn't the daimyo release his own daughter from her cell as he had the fox-woman?

Pearl-Ear could not credit the daimyo with the callousness it would take to exclude his only child, but then again, she could not credit his imprisoning Michiko in the first place. A few short months ago, Princess Michiko had secretly left the tower in direct disobedience of her father and her tutor, exposing herself to the myriad and very real dangers of the Kami War and the open countryside. Disastrous circumstances prevented Pearl-Ear from bringing Michiko-hime back immediately, and when they did return Konda's forbearance had melted like a cobweb in a blacksmith's forge. He blamed Pearl-Ear for the string of catastrophes that had occurred while Michiko was outside his protection, and he was furious at Michiko for defying him.

Even now, Pearl-Ear could understand Konda's anger but not his inability to control it. He locked his daughter in one of the tallest rooms in the tower and threw Pearl-Ear into a cell of her own far below. Pearl-Ear, who had stayed on as a kitsune ambassador to Konda's court for decades precisely to be with Michiko-hime, was now barred from seeing the princess ... or anyone else, save the soldiers who guarded her.

The sudden beating of a heavy drum interrupted Pearl-Ear's thoughts, and a murmur went through the crowd. The soldiers all snapped to attention without the slightest sound or glance from their officers. The air seemed to vibrate throughout the courtyard. Daimyo Konda was coming.

The great double doors swung wide, and a procession of heralds marched through in lines of three. The first row wore huge drums bound across their chests. The second three carried short poles, between which hung a long bolt of cloth with Konda's sun and moon standard woven in. The final trio, young girls in white robes, scattered white flowers behind them as they exited the tower.

There was a pause as the last few petals fluttered to the dusty ground. Then, Daimyo Konda himself emerged to the thunderous roars of his army, accompanied by his most trusted general and a small platoon of bodyguards.

Konda was well into his seventies, but he hadn't visibly aged since the birth of his daughter twenty years past. His long white hair almost glowed in the dim light, cascading past his shoulders. His beard and mustache were likewise white, healthy, and strong, following every turn of his head like a long cavalry banner at full gallop. He was dressed in a fine robe of gold brocade with dazzling silver moons embroidered across its front.

In the poor light and the great distance Konda's eyes seemed perfectly normal, but Pearl-Ear knew his pupils floated and meandered around the sockets like blind fish in a bowl. Even when he had condemned her to her lonely cell, even when his face was mere inches away and all his attention was focused on her, his eyes drifted lazily back and forth, sometimes floating outside the boundaries of his face. Much had changed about Konda during the twenty years of war with the kakuriyo.

Pearl-Ear tore her gaze from Konda long enough to verify what her ears told her was true: though the citizens of Towabara shouted and stamped their feet along with the soldiers, their fervor was hollow and listless. Their situation was too grave and Konda had been too long detached from the lives of his people. He had once been the nation's greatest joy, but all Pearl-Ear sensed now from the people was the painful weight of desperation and a dour wave of fear. Whatever their ruler had gathered them to say, she prayed that it would give the people hope.

His herald called for silence. Konda stepped up to a podium and raised his arms wide.

"Children of Towabara," he said, his voice deep and powerful. "You are all welcome here. As cruel fate has deprived me of my own daughter's trust, I take great solace in the love and obedience you have shown me today.

"I have brought you here to reassure you—not by words, but by demonstration. Our enemies are strong. They are numerous, and relentless. It is the power of our nation that excites them, the fear that we will become more powerful than they. When I began to unify the tribes and city-states of this land under my protection, other great daimyo behaved in exactly the same manner. They would rather attack than accept the wisdom of joining a greater cause, would rather viciously and spitefully wound the great state that seeks to lift them up. The kami and great myojin of the spirit world are frightened, my people. Frightened of you and me and the strength we represent. I thought I could turn aside their fear and their anger long enough for them to see our inevitable victory, for we are the future of Kamigawa. I thought this, but I was wrong."

Audible gasps of disbelief ran through the crowd. Konda gripped the podium and leaned forward.

"Yes, my children, wrong. The armies of the kakuriyo have abandoned any semblance of honorable warfare. They strike from ambush without warning, without regard to youth or innocence. Recent events have proven that they will stop at nothing, not even the use of their ultimate weapon on troops performing a mission of mercy in the name of a father's love ..."

Konda's loud voice trailed off, and his mind seemed to wander as his eyes drifted across his face.

“What about the Spirit Beast?” someone shouted. “Three thousand dead in a single stroke and a hundred acres swallowed whole. We all felt the tremor, Great Lord. What power do we have in the face of that?”

The speaker had dared too much. Pearl-Ear had pinpointed the man’s position in the crowd seconds before the soldiers nearby fell on him and rendered him silent.

“My brother died in that folly, daimyo.”

“And mine. No one can tell me how or why.”

“Do you even know, Konda?”

The voices began to come from all around the courtyard, faster than the guards could find and muffle them. The daimyo had claimed the kami were frightened, but Pearl-Ear heard true fear in the voices of Konda’s subjects as they cried out for their sons, brothers, wives, and sisters who had fallen.

A flash of bright white light crackled across Konda’s body. “Enough.” Though his voice was smooth and even, it was loud enough to shake the fortress walls and drive half the audience to their knees.

Among the groans and gasps, Konda continued. “I will not be shouted at by you rabble like an absent-minded servant. We have all suffered from this war. Why this has happened is not as important as our response.

“I am your lord and master, and more, I am your protector. I have assessed the threats we face, new and old, and I have devised our answer to those threats.” He raised and lowered his arm, and the drummers beat out a new tattoo. Across the courtyard, the great main gates opened to reveal a massive company of mounted soldiers. Beyond the cavalry, five thousand infantry stood at the ready.

“The go-yo and the Eiganjo battalion have proven themselves capable of protecting this city. The rest of my army will ride forth into Kamigawa, driving the kami before them. No longer will my retainers sit and wait to be attacked. If the kakuriyo seeks total warfare, we will fight it on our terms, not theirs.”

With a grand flourish, Konda waved his arms. A line of strange shapes soared out from behind the tower, matching rows of twelve on each side. With their huge, flat wings gracefully beating the air, huge moths spread out over the courtyard below, the pale yellow light glittering on their powdered wings. From their specially designed saddles, armored moth riders guided their steeds through their circling pattern as they soared and looped overhead.

The daimyo paused, and Pearl-Ear realized he was waiting for a reaction from the crowd. He was expecting a surge of applause, a riotous cheer from ten thousand grateful throats. Instead, not even the soldiers responded. Most were too busy eyeing the crowd, eager to pounce on anyone who broke the silence with more catcalls. The rest looked as pale and as frightened as their civilian peers.

Konda’s face darkened. He raised one fist and the white light crackled around him once more. “Behold,” he cried. “The kami send their most titanic beast to crush our resolve. When that beast comes again, it will not face mounted cavalry. Mere men cannot stand against the ultimate expression of the spirit world’s ire. No, to protect us against the marauding kami and the hostile myojin, I give my children Yosei, the Morning Star, mighty spirit dragon, guardian of the Eiganjo and all its loyal citizens.”

Konda’s fist opened. The stale air above the courtyard began to spin. It formed a dense ball of yellow fog, illuminated from within by the same crackling light that

adorned the daimyo. The fog thickened and spread, rising higher into the yellow sky until it was as large as the courtyard. As it passed over the moths, the great insects shuddered.

The spirit dragon Yosei burst from the fog like a snake slithering free of its leathery egg. He was long and slender. His forearms were folded flat along his streamlined body, and his scales bristled along his spine. His head was round, but his snout was flat and broad with whisker-like barbels on each side of his wide lips.

The white dragon coiled himself like a spring, spiraling higher until his hind legs and tail pulled free of the foggy dome. When he was whole and clear, Yosei's head darted down into the column created by his own coils. He emerged barely fifty yards over Konda, and there the great dragon stopped.

The daimyo gazed up, as did every other person in the courtyard. Pearl-Ear glanced at Konda then back up at Yosei, captivated by the huge beast. The dragon's barbels resembled Konda's long mustache, and when the daimyo nodded, the dragon nodded back.

Yosei's head shot forward toward the open gate. The rest of his long, graceful form followed the exact path of his head, curving down and around itself until the tip of his tail vanished through the gate and rose into the sky, out of sight. A trail of dust and yellow fog followed in his wake for a second, then dispersed.

"Yosei will not rest," Konda declared, "until he finds and destroys the Great Spirit Beast. In sending their most dreadful spirit against us, the kami have shown us their true power. I cannot allow such a display to go unanswered, and I will not allow another loyal subject of this realm to die when I can meet their greatest force with an even greater one.

"For Yosei serves me, as I serve you, and together we shall defeat our enemy. The kakuriyo is in its death-throes. When it is done thrashing, our entire nation will stand supreme."

Now the soldiers did cheer, and soon the citizens joined in, swept along by the fervor Yosei inspired. A chant of "Konda, Konda!" rose over the cheers, and the daimyo bowed his head. The drummers began to play an exit procession. Konda turned and disappeared into the tower, followed by his bodyguards. In the courtyard, the crowd and soldiers continued to exult.

Pearl-Ear did not share their joy. Instead, she peered upward once more, straining in vain for a glimpse of Michiko-hime in the tower above.



Princess Michiko was not at the window of her lavishly furnished cell during her father's address. She did not see the crowds, the soldiers, or the dragon, and though her thoughts often turned to Lady Pearl-Ear, she did not look for her tutor through the thick haze outside.

Instead, Michiko sat at her writing desk, busily inscribing the same complicated symbol on a blank scroll with a stiff-bristled brush. Lost in concentration, she muttered to herself as she traced the same lines over and over until the ink-soaked paper all but dissolved under her efforts.

She had seen no one but soldiers since her imprisonment—not her father, not her tutor, not her most intimate friend. She was well fed and given free access to any books in her father’s library, provided he approved them beforehand. She had read voraciously over the long months of her captivity, first a series of historical tomes about Kamigawa then scholarly texts about different spiritual practices. The daimyo had refused to supply any information she requested on the kami war, but he seemed content to let her complete her formal education on her own.

Apart from her books, Michiko was completely cut off from the outside world. The castle was well warded against any spells that might be cast to communicate with her, and the physical barriers of wall and sentry deterred any other kind of contact. Her friends, her mentor, her servants, and her father were all out of reach.

Michiko continued to trace the symbol. Fortunately, she had made acquaintances that her father didn’t know about. One of her books detailed the practices of kanji magicians, who used special symbols to focus their magic. A seasoned kanji mage could burn wood by carving the symbol for fire into it or induce fever by chalking the right character on her victim’s front door. By combining different symbols into the same kanji, even more powerful spells were possible.

The princess glanced down at the disintegrating sheet of parchment, still muttering to herself. When she had started practicing, she would often stop after the symbol for “messenger” before going on to the kanji for *hyozan*, or “iceberg.” Since taking her brush in hand several hours ago, she had not paused at all, blending the two symbols together in a series of smooth, practiced motions, chanting all the while.

The symbol under her brush twitched. Michiko’s eyes widened, but she kept tracing and chanting. It was beginning to work. She struggled to remain calm and to keep her rhythm steady.

There was a wet cracking sound as the kanji tore itself free of the paper and rose into the air. Michiko slid back in her chair, unwilling to breathe for fear of disrupting the ritual. She edged over so that she was between the floating symbol and the open window.

The messenger symbol did not try to leave, however, but floated before her as if waiting. Michiko took a breath and spoke softly, but clearly.

“Find him in the Takenuma Swamp,” she said. “I have a new commission for him and his reckoners.”

The symbol bobbed in the air. Michiko drew another breath and went on.

“Tell him I am in my father’s tower. I am a prisoner. Rescue me, and the reward will stagger the greediest of hearts.” Michiko paused, remembering her previous encounter with this would-be savior. “Even his.

“Go now,” she said. “Tell Toshi that I will be waiting for him.”

The messenger symbol rotated in the air before the princess then shot out of the open window and disappeared into the gloom.

Toshi Umezawa sat at the bar in one of the worst taverns the world had ever known. Most of the buildings in Takenuma Swamp were grim, but The Rat's Nest was in a class by itself. The cups were filthy, the wine was foul, and the clientele was criminally insane. It was perched up on bamboo stilts like every other establishment in the Numai section of the swamp, but the Nest's east end had sunk far deeper into the muck so that foul, oily water lapped at the patron's feet at one end of the room.

There were only two things on the menu: a grayish rice wine that tended to strip the enamel off ceramic cups and a wad of unidentifiable meat on a stick. Apart from the *nezumi-bito* rat-folk, who could eat just about anything without retching, Toshi had never seen anyone take so much as a bite of the meat skewer without turning green and fouling himself.

Toshi mimed taking a sip of wine but poured the gray liquid on the floor instead. He surreptitiously filled the cup from the flask of water he wore on his belt then poured that out, too. Only then did he fill the cup again and drink. The wine residue was still too strong, though, and he grimaced as the noisome liquid burned his throat.

Toshi had spent a large part of his life convinced that he deserved better than he got, but this outing marked a milestone in his disappointment. I'm a newly spiritual man, he thought. Surely I shouldn't have to pray for a decent drink.

Around him, a handful of nezumi and human reprobates also made do with the extremely limited menu. None of the other patrons paid much attention to the average-looking fellow with the long hair and the samurai swords, which was one of the reasons he had chosen this bar and this district. Almost all of the fen residents were outlaws, thieves, or *ochimusha* like him. Unless he had stolen from them or they were planning to steal from him, they had no business to discuss.

The door opened to his left, and Toshi glanced at the newcomer. He smiled briefly. Here was someone he had business with, someone who was a damn sight more pleasant to look at than the grubby one-eyed bartender or the filth-caked nezumi at the far table.

Kiku stood in the doorway for a few seconds, sneering in disgust at the interior and everyone in it. She was stunningly beautiful and resplendently dressed, wrapped in pale purple silk and fine embroidered satin. Her wrap was slit up each side below her waist, revealing her shapely legs up to her hips, and her blouse was tightly wound around her to display both her considerable curves and her natural grace as she walked. She sported wide, flaring sleeves that ended just below the elbow and matching purple gauntlets that covered her forearms to the backs of her hands. Her bright black eyes glittered like precious stones, but the rest of her face was concealed behind a folded paper fan she used to waft the foul tavern air away from her face. A

large purple camellia decorated Kiku's shoulder, its soft petals a perfect contrast to her sharp eyes and painted fingernails. Toshi thought her poise and beauty would have stood out at a rich man's formal banquet, but here in the Nest she was like a beautiful dream of an angel bringing him water in the desert.

Toshi sipped his drink to hide another smile. An angel, to be sure, but a dangerous one who could kill just about everyone in the room in one fell swoop if she cared to. Kiku was a *jushi*, a mage for hire who specialized in dark magic that was as powerful as it was unpleasant. Toshi had worked with Kiku before, so he was respectful but not afraid. He had convinced her to meet him here precisely because she was so formidable.

Kiku visibly steeled herself and strode boldly into the tavern. Wisely, none of the other patrons attempted to speak to her or catch her eye on the way. She stood next to Toshi for a moment, spread a purple satin square on the moldering old stool, and rested lightly on the edge of it.

"There's been a change in plans," she said. She snapped her fan shut and rested it across her lap. "Boss Uramon wants to see you now."

Toshi smiled foolishly. He toasted Kiku and spilled some of his drink on the bar. "That's not a problem. I want to see her, too."

Kiku reopened her fan with a loud crack, quickly enough that the metal spine at the edge shattered the tiny ceramic cup in Toshi's hand.

"You can drop the clumsy drunk act," she said. "I know you're neither."

Toshi glanced at his empty hand, his fingers still curled around the space where the cup had been. "All right," he said. "I was only doing it to spare the bartender's feelings." He leaned in and whispered, "He's very sensitive about the wine. I think his mother grows the rice herself."

Kiku sniffed. "She grows it in the septic fields, from the smell. Come on." She stood and motioned for Toshi to follow.

Toshi rose to his feet and tossed a few coins onto the bar. He had hoped for a chance to talk to Kiku alone about Uramon, but if the Boss wanted to see him sooner, he could accommodate that. Uramon was one of the most influential figures in the Takenuma underworld, and Toshi had worked for her in the past. It had taken some doing, but he had managed to redeem his contract with the Boss so that he was no longer obliged to serve her while also maintaining a cordial relationship with her. If she wanted to see him now, she either had work-for-hire or she wanted information.

In any case, all Toshi wanted now was to get inside Uramon's manor and take a look around. His discussion with Kiku could wait.

The purple-clad *jushi* held the door to let Toshi through first. He bobbed his head and stepped out onto the sodden bamboo deck.

"Oh," he said, when he saw the group waiting for him outside. "Great."

Six serious men armed with daggers and hatchets stood at the far end of the deck. Two more masked *jushi* waited next to a huge brindle dog with an enormous square head. The dog was silent, but he was straining so hard against his leash that his handler had to anchor himself onto one of the bamboo spires that held up the roof.

Before he could dash back into the bar or draw his sword, Toshi felt a gentle hand touch his shoulder. He tried to spin out from under the caress, but as he did he saw a flash of purple. He froze in mid-spin with one eye on the dog and the other on Kiku.

The jushi had placed one of her purple camellias on Toshi's shoulder. She was smiling casually.

"Don't worry," she said. "It won't do anything to you unless I tell it to."

Toshi remained rock-still, sweat beading across his forehead. Kiku's flowers could be deadlier than a snake bite and more caustic than acid.

"How do I keep you from telling it to?"

"By coming along peacefully. None of your tricks, none of your traps, none of your kanji magic. Uramon just wants to talk to you."

"I'm willing to talk. You don't need this. Or them." He motioned toward the hatchet men with his head.

"Self-obsessed, as usual." Kiku opened her fan and casually waved it under her chin. "This little outing was originally sent to bring back some troublesome rats who have been shockingly bold over the past few weeks. Uramon suspects someone new is moving in on her territory. Just as I was getting ready to come and see you, she requested the pleasure of your company. She said the other rats could wait."

"If there is someone moving in, it's not me. I've been lying low."

"I actually believe you. But it's not me you have to convince." She snapped the fan shut and prodded Toshi with it. "Move along now. Stay beside me and don't go too quickly. If I lose sight of you, the flower will put down roots in your torso."

"Thanks for the warning." Toshi glanced around at the assembled mercenaries and goons as the hatchet men formed up around him. The two jushi and the dog took up the rear. Sadly, the friendliest face he saw belonged to the burly canine straining to break its leash and savage him.

"All right," he said. He gallantly offered his arm to Kiku. "Off we go."

Kiku sniffed and slapped his arm away with her fan.

* * * * *

Boss Uramon's manor was at the far end of the swamp on the border between Takenuma the ruins at the edge of Konda's domain. Her home had once belonged to a rich retainer, but he had been called away years ago to fight kami. When he didn't return, Uramon had his family and servants driven off so that she could move in. From here she kept an eye on her interests in the swamp as well as those in more polite society.

Dozens of low-level thugs meandered around the grounds as Kiku and Toshi led the strange procession through the main gate. Uramon employed a huge staff of indentured servants and outright slaves who had mortgaged their futures past the point of redemption. Her home was one of the busiest commerce centers in all Kamigawa, with a steady flow of black market goods and dozens of enterprising tradespeople looking for work. Uramon stood at the center of this network of illegal commerce, extracting her share of whatever goods or services passed through her hidden sphere of influence.

Toshi knew the house well. For a time in his youth, he had been one of Uramon's reckoners, the brutal gangs that maintained her reputation through intimidation and violence. When someone defaulted on a usurious loan or failed to produce protection

money, her reckoners paid a visit. When an Uramon courier was waylaid or some of her stolen property went missing, she sent her reckoners. Any debt, any slight, any injury to Uramon's organization would prompt a visit from the fallen warriors in her service.

It was a dirty, dangerous job, and getting out from under Uramon's influence was the best thing Toshi had ever done for himself. Years ago he had formed his own independent band of reckoners and dubbed them the hyozan. With a significant investment of time, effort, and currency, he had convinced Uramon to accept his departure. Now he was back, and while he had settled his account with Uramon, the Boss was never one to let go easily of something she owned. If he were lucky, she would merely ask him a few questions and offer him work. If not, things could get messy.

They left the dog and the hatchet men outside. The other jushi entered the manor but fell back and let Kiku lead him into the manor's interior. She stayed close as they went inside, brushing aside the sentries who rose to meet them. Since their party was expected, they had no trouble navigating through the opulent rooms on the first floor and climbing the staircase to Uramon's chamber on the second. The burly guards outside Uramon's room nodded to Kiku and opened the door.

Uramon kneeled in the center of the room. She was resting on a square stone platform in the middle of a rectangular pit filled with black sand. A collection of irregular-shaped rocks were scattered across the surface of the sand. Tall candles burned at each corner of the pit. Uramon carried a long-handled wooden rake, which she pulled through the sand, tracing parallel lines between and around the stones. She was singing softly to herself in a low, meditative voice, a study in tranquility.

Toshi had never been able to calculate Uramon's age. Her face was always covered in a thick layer of white powder, and her hair was either dyed black or she wore an excellent wig. She had a round face, but there was no softness to it. Her expression was always one of disinterest and her eyes were frequently half-closed. Behind her slitted lids, though, they were sharp and penetrating. Neither beautiful nor homely, Uramon's face was a nondescript mask that she had spent a lifetime perfecting. Unless she spoke or made eye contact, it was impossible to imagine how such a bland woman had mustered such a successful criminal empire. People taken in by this false lack of charisma often found themselves working for Uramon without knowing exactly how.

"Hail Uramon, venerable boss of Takenuma." Toshi bowed.

Uramon kept singing, but she lifted the rake out of the sand. Carefully, she hauled in the tool and rested it on the stone platform. Only then did she fall silent and gaze up at Toshi and Kiku.

"Umezawa," she said. "What a happy occasion this is. Thank you for coming."

Her voice was like her face, dull and unobtrusive, but Toshi did not relax. He knew the speed and the sharpness of the mind behind that sallow voice. Uramon would not be disarmed by his personality, so he must not be disarmed by hers.

"All you had to do was ask. We're old friends." He gestured to the camellia on his shoulder. "Now that I'm here, can we transplant Kiku's friend somewhere else?"

Uramon rose. "I think not. At least, not yet." She folded her arms into the sleeves of her simple black robe and stepped into her wooden sandals. As Toshi watched and waited, she shuffled across the surface of the black sand, barely disrupting the careful

rake-lines and avoiding the stones. When she reached the edge of the pit and stepped onto the lacquered wooden floor, not a single grain of sand came with her.

She gestured for Toshi and Kiku to follow her as she crossed to the far side of the room. She sat on a square pillow facing the door and motioned for Toshi to step forward.

“I understand you’ve had some trouble with the *soratami*,” she said.

“Moonfolk?” Toshi said. “I think I saw one once, as a boy, but they don’t usually come to Numai.”

“They don’t usually come to any part of the swamp,” Uramon said. “Lately, that has changed. I had hoped you would know something about it.”

“No, Boss. I’ve been out of circulation ever since I got religion.”

Uramon smiled indulgently. “It’s good to pray, my boy. Although there’s hardly a kami left who won’t try to take a bite out of anyone who calls for its blessing.”

“I’m new to it,” Toshi admitted. “I don’t think I’ve gotten the spirits’ attention properly just yet, but I keep trying.”

“Excellent. And you have no idea why the *soratami* have been stirring up the rats?”

“Have they? No, Boss, I don’t.”

“Hmm. That’s not what Marrow-Gnawer told me.”

Toshi forced a smile. “How is my old friend Marrow? I haven’t seen him lately, either. Is he well?”

“Not at present, but he is very truthful. My hatchet men are experts at teasing the truth out of people, as I’m sure you recall.”

Toshi’s smile wavered. “Indeed I do. And he says I’m mixed up with the *soratami*? That’s very odd. He’s not very bright, you know. Perhaps he meant someone else?”

“Why don’t we ask him together?” Uramon clapped her hands. The door to the chamber opened, and two large men dragged in a limp nezumi. The rat-man’s feet barely scraped the floor.

“Open his eyes,” Uramon said. One of the guards grabbed the black fur on top of Marrow-Gnawer’s head, pulled his head back, and shook it.

Toshi held his frozen smile. One of Marrow’s eyes was swollen shut, and his face was a mass of bloody bruises and badly healed cuts. Toshi glanced down and noticed two of his fingers were missing and that his legs were covered in tiny wounds like pinpricks.

Marrow-Gnawer groaned. His good eye fluttered open just as the second sentry tossed a dipper of water in his face.

The nezumi coughed and ran his long tongue across his lips and muzzle, taking up as much of the cool liquid as he could. The guard shook him again and shoved him forward so that he fell to his knees.

“Marrow-Gnawer,” Uramon said. The rat-man hissed piteously.

The boss turned to Toshi. “He and his fellows were leaving one of my establishments with all of the night’s revenue on their backs. Fortunately, my employees were able to convince the gang to stay and chat for a while. He told me quite a tale.”

She spoke once more to the nezumi. “Tell Toshi what you told me, Marrow.”

The rat-man groaned. He steadied himself on all fours and looked up at the humans. He coughed and wiped his mouth, leaving a streak of blood on the back of his hand.

“Moonfolk commissioned jobs in the ruins,” he said. “Toshi interfered. Saw the soratami, ran off. But the job was ruined. The soratami blamed us, and now they own me and my whole tribe.” He cast his eyes down again. “Didn’t want to rob you, Boss. Had to. Soratami would have killed me.”

“I understand, Marrow, but by now you must realize how short-sighted that decision was.” Uramon nodded to the sentries, who hauled Marrow-Gnawer off his feet and dragged him into the corner of the room.

“So,” she said. “The soratami are encroaching on my business. I would normally send my own reckoners to deal with this, but it seems that you already have an inside line on what they’re up to.”

“I don’t, Boss. I really don’t. It was bad luck that put me in the middle of Marrow’s job. I just wanted to get away.”

“I believe you, Toshi. Of course I do. But the facts as I see them are: The soratami are interfering with my operation, and they’re using the nezumi as stooges. You’ve had dealings with both, and you were always one of my most reliable reckoners, in spite of your foolish insistence on freelancing.”

Toshi tried to follow Uramon’s lead and keep his voice neutral. “You want me to take on the moonfolk? I’m flattered, Boss, but I’m not qualified.”

“Not on your own. With Kiku and a few of my hatchet men to back you up, you would have a much better chance. Especially if Marrow here brings you to his next meeting with the soratami so you have the element of surprise.”

Uramon rose, stepped forward, and fixed her heavy-lidded eyes on Toshi. “I am commissioning you and your hyozan for a reckoning, boy. The soratami stole from me. They’ve been stealing from me for weeks. Take whatever and whomever you need to Marrow’s next meeting. Kill as many of them as you can, and bring their heads back to me.”

Toshi held the drab woman’s gaze. “Too risky, Boss. Half the people you send won’t make it back. I don’t like those odds.”

“I’m already sharing the risk, as are Kiku and her clan. But if it’s compensation you’re worried about, we can come to an arrangement.”

Toshi shook his head. “Sorry, Boss. I refuse.”

Uramon lashed out, striking Toshi across the face with the back of her hand. The black enameled ring on her little finger gouged a line of flesh from his cheek.

“You presume too much, Toshi. You may not refuse, because I want this. Your odds against the soratami are far better than your chances against Kiku’s flower, and you will wear her bloom like a schoolgirl’s corsage until you return to me with the goods in hand.”

Boss Uramon turned. Her voice was soft and lifeless. “Take them out and clean them up. Kiku, my dear, I expect nothing short of brilliance from you. Toshi is a tricky one, but I have every confidence that you can keep him under control.”

Toshi wiped the drops of blood from his cheek and glanced at Kiku. He hid a smile behind his hand as he stared at the ring on Uramon’s hand. She didn’t always wear it, but now that he knew she still possessed it he was free to take his leave.

“Don’t do it,” Kiku whispered. “Whatever you’re thinking, don’t do it.”

“I don’t have to do anything,” Toshi said loudly. “If you kill me, you’ll have the entire hyozan after you until my death is avenged. Your reckoners take revenge for

you, Boss, to protect your business. Mine only work for each other.”

“Who said anything about killing?” Uramon cocked her head and folded her hands into her sleeves. “I asked Kiku to plant a camellia not to make you dead but to make you wish you were dead. The reckoner oath you amateurs swore only applies if you’re killed, am I right? Blind, dismembered, and in constant agony won’t count.”

The flower on his shoulder squirmed. Toshi looked hard at Kiku.

“The Boss is right,” Kiku said. “That’s a very special flower. It will never stop doing terrible things to you, but it won’t kill you. The ogre shaman and the others will never know.”

Toshi nodded. “I see you have all the angles covered, Boss. As usual.”

“Of course. Now. I want you to begin as soon as—”

“But you’ve overlooked one important thing this time.”

“Oh? And what might that be?”

“I’ve found religion—and the kami I pray to is one of the few that still answers.”

Uramon replied, but Toshi was concentrating too hard to listen. There were kami spirits for everything in the utsushiyo—storms, rivers, stones, swords, light. Even concepts such as justice and rage had patron spirits in the kakuriyo. Toshi had fallen in with the Myojin of Night’s Reach, the major spirit of darkness and secrecy, which held sway wherever there was no light. He made very few demands on her and she on him, but he had spent all of his time lately establishing what her power could do and how to invoke it. He was by no means expert, but he had learned to call upon her blessings in a manner that suited him perfectly.

The kanji carved into his arm months ago throbbed, invisible under his sleeve. Uramon was still talking, and he sensed Kiku shouting and waving her arms. The flower on his shoulder squirmed again, and the first painful points of its lethal roots pressed into his flesh.

Toshi disappeared under the probing tips of the plant, fading from sight like a wisp of steam. Invisible and intangible, he watched as the loathsome, wriggling bloom fell through the space he occupied and landed on the floor with a soft thud. He could still see and hear everything in the room as normal, but he could not be seen, or heard, or touched until the myojin’s blessing wore off.

“Take that one back to his cell,” snapped Uramon, gesturing at Marrow-Gnawer. She turned to Kiku and snarled softly, “I did not know Toshi was capable of such things.”

“Nor I, Boss.” Kiku scooped up the flower and closed her fist around it. When she opened her hand, the bloom was gone. “He kept saying he’d gotten religion, but he lies so often I barely listen to him anymore.”

Uramon nodded, her slack face unchanged, her eyes hard and furious. “Gather your fellows and a dozen of my hatchet men. Search the grounds. He may have vanished, but he can’t have gotten far. When you find him, bring him back here.”

Still in the precise spot he had been, Toshi watched Kiku exit. Uramon was right—he was completely safe in this shroud of shadow, but he could not move quickly and could not stay concealed forever. As a phantom, he was too insubstantial to cast spells or cover great distances.

Fortunately, he didn’t need to go far. With a colossal effort of will, Toshi floated after Uramon as the boss skirted the edge of her sand pit and exited the chamber.

She still wore the ring, which was half of what he wanted from her. If she didn't lead him to the other half soon, he would strike out on his own and search the manor himself. So long as the guards and Kiku were searching outside, it wouldn't even matter when the myojin's blessing faded. By then, he meant to be well on his way, safe with the information he came for.

Solid and visible once more, Toshi trudged through the muck at the south end of the great Takenuma Swamp. He had learned all he needed to in Uramon's manor before slipping out and following the slow, tortuous route of a phantom to safety.

When Night's blessing finally left him, he was just outside Uramon's property. He knew someone in Uramon's employ would be able to track him—either the nezumi by scent or the jushi by spell. He moved on as quickly as he could, taking no special measures to hide his trail. Toshi had a gift for self-preservation and improvisation that had kept him alive and out of extreme poverty among the fen's cutthroat community. Uramon's interest in him changed the order of his long-term goals but not the goals themselves. Let them follow. He could actually use a gang of expendable thugs, provided he stayed one step ahead of them.

The ground slowly began to firm under his feet as he left the outskirts of the swamp and headed into the cold, rocky realm of the Sokenzan Mountains. Toshi saw the thin, needle-like spires that littered the horizon and tightened his cloak against the dry, chill air. He had traveled from the fen to the mountains and back a dozen times or more, but normally he was much farther east. His present heading took him along the western edge of the range, where the cold was more constant and the snow never melted but was driven into drifts by the bitter wind.

He had done far more than pray since his last trip to the mountains. There was a surprising amount of commerce between the fen and the Sokenzan, and his ability to go unnoticed permitted him unprecedented access to private conversations between bandits and black marketeers.

He collected quite a bit of useful information about the western quadrant of the range. Here was where the greatest concentration of akki goblins lived, tribes of a thousand or more dug into the frozen hills like bees in a hive. Here the great *sanzoku* bandit chieftain Godo had escaped the daimyo's troops time and again, raiding the great lord's riches then melting away into the rocky wastes. Here the spirits of stone and bloodlust roamed, as sharp and unforgiving as the landscape itself. Here were peaks blighted and accursed, haunted by wild spirits more terrible than anything society had encountered—even the twisted and corrupt society of the swamp.

Toshi wasn't sure how much of this was truth and how much was *sanzoku* bragging, but he was sure that the next step in his spiritual evolution waited for him at the top of one of these frozen spits of rock.

He plowed on through the dusty, ankle-deep snow for the better part of a day. The farther south he went, the colder it got. At last, he reached the foothills of the western Sokenzan and saw his path rising up before him, a long, treacherous way that disappeared into the mist and low-lying clouds above.