

The Twelve Kingdoms  
Sea of the Wind, Shore of the Maze  
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## PROLOGUE

Snow drifted from the sky.

The large and heavy snowflakes fell as if they would never stop. To look up at the sky was to see a canvas of white with countless dull, gray shadows painted upon it.

His line of sight followed the snow sweeping across his entire field of vision into the sky, and before he knew it, all he saw was the white of the sky.

He watched as a snowflake lightly drift onto his shoulder. It was a big and thick snowflake that looked like a crystal that was made of cotton. Snowflakes continuously fell onto his shoulders, arms and his bright red palms. They immediately melted into the transparent color of water.

His white breath really showed how piercingly frigid it was. He turned his small child's slender neck and the white of his breath followed his movements and hung in the air, making him feel even colder.

He had already stood there for an hour. His little hands and exposed knees were all red like a completely ripened fruit, and he had lost all feeling in them. No matter how he rubbed or covered them, he only felt the cold seep into his bones. So he was like this, feeling nothing as he stared uncertainly into the air.

This was the yard on the northern side. A storehouse that was no longer in use stood in the corner of the narrow yard. A crack in the earthen wall made the air even colder. The three sides of the courtyard were the main building, the storehouse, and where the wall contained the yard. However, at this frigid and windless time, there was nothing he could use in this place to shelter him from the cold. There wasn't even anything in the yard you could call a tree. For a time in the summer, the irises would bloom, but right now, the ground was only scattered with the white snow.

"What a stubborn child." His grandmother had moved from the Kansai region when she had gotten married, but when she spoke, she still carried a thick accent.

"He could at least cry a little. Even a little bit would let people know that he feels bad."

"Mother, you don't actually have to be so harsh."

"It's because you dote on him so much that he's become so stubborn."

"But..."

"Today's young parents only know how to please their children. It's better if the children receive some strict discipline."

"But mother, what if he gets a cold..."

"He won't get a cold from a little bit of snow. --You listen to me. Unless he sincerely apologizes, he's not allowed back inside."

He just stood there.

In fact, all this had originally happened because of a small matter; someone had dripped water onto the floorboards under the sink and hadn't wiped it up. His younger brother blamed him and he denied that he'd done it. By his thinking, it was because he didn't remember doing such a thing that he felt secure enough to say that he didn't do it. His grandmother often warned him that telling lies was the worst thing he could do, so he didn't want to lie and say that he had done such a thing.

"Just be honest and apologize, and the matter would be over."

Grandmother had said it very severely, so he could only explain again that he hadn't done it.

"Why are you so stubborn?"

His grandmother always said this about him, so his young mind decided that he was indeed stubborn. Even though he wasn't too clear on what exactly "stubborn" meant, he had his own way of explaining it: because I'm a "stubborn" child, grandmother doesn't like me.

He hadn't cried because he was confused. His grandmother wanted him to apologize, but if he had given in and done so, wouldn't he have become the kind of lying child that his grandmother hated so much? He didn't know what the right thing to do was. He felt very anxious.

The hallway extended horizontally in front of him. Beyond the hallway's glass window was the paper door of the kitchen. Through the half piece of glass installed in the paper door, he could see his grandmother and his mother arguing in the kitchen.

The two of them arguing made him feel very sad. Usually, in the end his mother would admit she was wrong, and then she would have no choice but to quickly clean the bathroom. He knew that his mother would eventually hide in the bathroom and secretly weep.

--Is mommy crying again?

He thought about this as he stood uncertainly. His feet felt a little numb. He moved all his weight onto one foot and felt a dull pain in his knee. He could not feel the tips of his feet, but he still forced himself to try to move a little more.

As a result, he immediately felt and retreated from a sharp, cold pain. He could feel the snow melting on his knees, melting into an icy water that trickled down his calf.

When he sighed heavily the way children do, a puff of wind suddenly brushed the back of his neck. It wasn't a cold, empty draft but a very warm breeze. He looked around because he thought that someone had felt sorry for him and opened a door for his sake.

However, after he looked all around him, he found that all the windows were still shut tightly. The window facing the opposite room was covered in a thin fog because of the warm air inside.

He tilted his head suspiciously and looked around once more. The warm air still didn't stop blowing onto him.

He looked towards the side of the storehouse and immediately blinked his eyes in surprise. A white object extended from the small crevice between the storehouse and the wall. It looked like a person's arm, a completely bare arm, white and full, reaching out from the crevice behind the storehouse, but he couldn't see to whom the arm belonged. He thought, could they be hiding behind the storehouse?

He felt like that was unthinkable. The space in the crevice between the storehouse and the wall was too small. Yesterday, his brother had cried the whole day because he couldn't get the baseball that had rolled into the narrow crack. Even with his or his brother's small bodies, they couldn't fit anything in the crevice but their arms. That arm looked like it belonged to an adult, yet how were they able to fit into that space?

The forearm portion of the arm was swaying as if it were stirring water. He realized that the hand was beckoning to him, and then he took a step toward it. It was very strange that although his knees were numb from the cold, they didn't make any dry, rough sounds.

He didn't feel the least bit frightened, because he realized that the warm air was blowing from that direction. He was really very cold and he also didn't know what he should do, so he obediently walked over towards the arm.

The snow had already completely coated the ground, almost covering all of his little footprints, eventually leaving no trace of him. The white sky resembled faded ink, the color gradually changing.

The white of the short winter day gradually turned into the color of night.

## CHAPTER ONE

1

No one knows how a life is actually created. Especially speaking of the biology of things that are not human, this is even more of a riddle.

Life and consciousness suddenly arrived upon her body just like this.

When she came to, her body was under a white tree branch, and there was only one name in her mind.

--Taiki.

In the process of getting up, this name slowly occupied the whole of her mind. At the same time, she also got a hold on the rest of the situation: who she was, why she was born, as well as what her most important mission was.

--Taiki.

She propped up her upper body. These ideas were still flooding her mind, and they simultaneously spread into every corner of her body.

She straightened her waist, as if she was letting water that had dripped onto her body trickle onto every surface. She lifted her head and closed her eyes. Teardrops slid down from the corners of her eyes and dribbled into her damp hair.

She tried to move her feet, which did not yet have any strength in them, and bumped into the wet soil and golden shards next to her feet.

The shards once belonged to the egg shell that protected her, and the liquid that had originally filled the egg had already been absorbed by the soil. She had just hatched from inside the shell, and the golden egg that had contained her had fallen down from a branch, breaking into pieces all over the ground.

She stared at the shards of the golden egg, and after a little bit, lifted her head again to look at the white branch in front of her. As if it were made of white silver, the long branch extended beyond the top of her head and outward. The root was sturdily set into the high cliff wall.

On the branch, there were still a few little, round golden fruits. Although no one had told her, she already knew by intuition that there were still unhatched lives inside all the fruits, and not too long ago, she herself had also waited like this in the fruit to be hatched.

This is how life is actually created.

--Taiki.

She used her strength to prop up her four legs and stood up, while she cried once again.

Her tears flowed only to protect her two eyes, which had been exposed to the outside air for the first time, but the feeling of the warm, wet tears slipping down made her feel as if the only name that she held in her mind was slowly seeping into the very depths of her body.

She wordlessly called out "Taiki! Taiki!" and again tears welled up in her eyes.

She stood up straight and discovered that her hair was hooked on a branch. The four legs on the lower half of her body stood firmly on the ground, whereupon she used the two hands on the upper half of her body to push aside the branch.

"You've hatched?"

Suddenly hearing someone speak, she turned her head to look for the source of the sound.

It was very dim all around. Only the branch above her head gave off a white glow.

After waiting for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, she then saw that she was in an enormous cave.

This was a particularly big cave in the shape of a half-circle with a white tree dangling in the middle. Those branches that were hanging over her, were actually the roots of the tree. These roots had cut through the cliff wall and hung very intricately from a place extremely high in the cave and reached all the way down to her feet.

"Yes."

Suddenly, the sound was even closer.

"You look like a very good nyokai."

She looked around again.

This time, she immediately found the person to whom the voice belonged. It was a hunchbacked old woman who was standing only a few steps from her.

This short old woman's height only reached her chest. The old woman reached out with her two gnarled hands and lightly stroked her hair.

"You are female."

And then the old woman stroked her cheeks.

"You have the neck of a fish."

Then she patted her wrists.

"The upper half of your body is human..."

The hand that had rested on her back slid down and she lightly patted her tail bone.

"...the lower half of your body is that of a leopard, and your tail is that of a lizard. What a terrific mix!"

Finally, the old woman softly pressed on the backbone that connected both parts of her body.

"All right, stop crying. Come with me."

So she followed the old woman. With every step, her tears fell to the dry earth and left little black dots.

They walked slowly and spent a long time passing through the cave before she saw a set of stairs where the top of the arc-shaped cliff wall met the dirt below their feet.

"You will be called Sanshi!"

The old woman finally spoke.

"San, Shi. From now on, everyone will call you Sanshi."

She silently took steps upward on the stone stairs and listened at the same time to the old woman speak.

"Your surname will be Haku, for this is the rule for all nyokai hatched upon Mt. Hou."

The stone stairs made a big turn, and after she went up the steps a bit, she suddenly saw a ray of light.

"The reason you can have a surname is because you carry on your back a very important mission. You must never forget this."

She nodded her head. As to what this very important mission was, she didn't need the old woman to tell her, for it was already very clear to her.

Once again, she firmly engraved into her mind the mission that she was to shoulder as she silently walked up the stone steps. After ascending a ways, the field of vision in front of her opened up. It turned out that the higher the stone steps went, the wider they became, and at the end, there was a square cave opening.

She stopped walking.

She lifted her head and looked out of the opening, seeing only the pale blue sky and the trunk and branches of a dazzlingly big white tree reaching up into the sky.

The tears that were so hard to stop before started flowing again though she tried to stifle them.

The old woman patted her back again.

"All right, you should go."

She took a few strides and then began to run, using the four legs that had just been hatched to run for the first time.

As soon as she leapt from the cave opening, sunlight splashed upon her body and pierced her eyes so that she began to cry again. She ran straight to a spot under the tree.

Her egg had originally formed among the roots of the tree. Compared to the long and slender roots, the trunk itself appeared to be short and thick. The long branches reached from the mossy stone steps to the sky, and on one of the snow-white branches, there grew a golden fruit.

"Taiki!"

She said something for the first time.

The golden fruit had grown in the same corresponding area as her egg. The fruit was still very small, so small that you could wrap two hands around it. The sunlight shined upon her sensitive skin, which was not completely dry yet. She used both her hands to surround the fruit and carefully pressed her cheek against it.

She was still crying.

"Taiki..."

This was Sanshi's birth.

The Yellow Sea is situated at the center of the world.

Although it's called the Yellow Sea, it isn't made up of water. The only things that flow in the Yellow Sea are time and the wind. What's left over are boundless deserts and endless forests, as well as large swamps and continuous mountains.

In the center of the Yellow Sea, there is a particularly high mountain range. This mountain range is called the "Five Mountains" and consists of five lofty mountains with complex shapes.

The tallest mountain located at the very center is called, "High Su." The mountains connected all around it are separated into Mt. Hou, Mt. Ka, Mt. Kaku, and Mt. Kou. In ancient times, Mt. Hou was called Mt. Tai, but every time a disaster occurs, the name is changed. For the last thousand years, it has always been called Mt. Hou.

Legend has it that the Five Mountains belong under the authority of Seioubo, and Mt. Hou belongs to Oufujin. Regarding the masters of the other four mountains, the rumors have always varied. Regardless of whether these legends are real or fake, it is known absolutely that the Five Mountains are the lands of goddesses and nyosen.

All of the Five Mountains reach up very high in the sky, but, like the Yellow Sea at their base, they are very uncultivated. The complex terrain is made up of only trees, rocks, water, and a wind that never stops blowing.

There is a small palace on the middle section of Mt. Hou, called "Houro Palace." This is the only place in not just Mt. Hou but the whole of the Five Mountains where people live.

"Oh? It's a poppy."

Teiei mumbled to herself as she squatted down for a closer look.

She was drawn to several poppy flower petals on the surface of the spring water.

Youka, who had been walking behind Teiei, also stopped. The radiant red flower petals floating on the crystal clear surface of the water was such that it drew people's eyes to it.

"Are they from the poppy garden?"

Teiei nodded her head in reply to Youka's question and extended her hand again to pull some petals out of the water.

"The wind probably blew them over here. The wind feels a little bit different today."

Youka nodded her head in agreement and then lifted her head and looked around.

Interesting rocks can be seen everywhere on Mt. Hou. The green moss that grows all over the surface of the rocks turned the perimeter outside of Houro Palace into a maze, especially on the high terrace where Houro Palace sits.

The crags are really worthy of their reputation. The surface is rugged and goes in and out as if the towering rocks will collapse at any time. Even the smaller of the rocks are three times the height of a person. In addition, the small paths that weave through the rocks are so narrow that they only allow two women to pass through at one time, walking shoulder to shoulder.

Teiei was now walking on a small path, stopping en route to gather the poppy petals drifting around on the surface of the mountain spring water.

She was a nyosen who looked as if she were eighteen or nineteen, but a nyosen's age could not be determined by looking at her appearance. Neither how nor when she became a shousen are clear even to her. This meant that she had arrived at Mt. Hou a very long time ago. Out of the over fifty nyosen, Teiei had lived on Mt. Hou the longest.

Opposite to her, Youka had just become a nyosen not too long ago. Only 16 years of age, she was originally a girl from an ordinary peasant family. However, not knowing why she was totally incompatible with the common customs, at the age of 13, she took the shousen oath, and from then on, did not eat grain. She spent three years at the shrine of Seioubo living a pious life, and she finally attained purity just recently and was summoned up to Mt. Hou.

Thus, it had not been long since the day Youka arrived at Mt. Hou. She had just moved from living on Mt. High Su to Houro Palace only half a month ago, but even she felt as if the wind that day did not blow as it usually did.

Ordinarily, the wind calmly whisked through the small path, but this day, it was both strong and urgent. At one second, it blew powerfully up the crags into the sky, and at the next, it scraped the edges of the cliff walls downward, curling into a gusty whirlwind. Even the sky was looking murky. Since there was only a thin layer of clouds, they didn't know why it gave off such an oppressive feeling.

"Is this some sort of omen?"

Teiei tilted her head to contemplate the question Youka had brought up.

"It shouldn't be. This morning's Eight Diagrams divination symbol didn't show that anything would occur. Come on, let's hurry and draw water out and then get back."

"Yes."

Youka tossed the bucket that was in her hands into the spring water.

This pool of spring water is called "Kaidou Spring." The spring water gushes endlessly from the base of the crags, and a great sea paulownia (kaidou) tree covers the tops of the crags around the pool.

Of course, the spring water of Houro Palace doesn't come from just this one pool. No one has been silly enough to count how many springs there are in all, but the number is many, so it follows that they had to name every spring lest they confuse them.

On Mt. Hou, there are no differences in the seasons. Flowers can bloom throughout the year. For instance, right then there were a few little fluffy white sea paulownia flowers floating on the surface of the spring. Because the fragrance of the flowers had permeated the water, though it was not known when it started, the wooden water bucket also gave off the scent of the sea paulownia flower.

The scented water in the bucket is for an offering at Taishin Shrine in Houro Palace for the patron goddess of Mt.

Hou--it is used for washing the wooden image of Oufujin.

Youka pushed aside the flowers as she filled the bucket with water, and then she turned around and prepared to walk in the direction of Taishin Shrine. At this time, Teiei smiled and called out to her.

"Where are you going?"

"Hm? I'm going to help Oufu..."

Teiei laughed.

"The shrine isn't in that direction! Don't you remember which way to walk yet?"

Youka looked at the three diverging paths and her face could not help turning red.

"I've really gotten the direction wrong."

The rocks and the countless diverging paths made Mt. Hou into an absolute maze.

The only ones who can master all the routes are those who live on Mt. Hou. Only the nyosen who live here can choose the right route in the spider-web-like paths, in order to get to the side of a clear river to wash clothes, to a waterfall to bathe, or to a pure spring to draw water. The area wasn't big, whether she wanted to reach the grasslands, flower gardens, and vegetable gardens, all splashed with sunlight, or she wanted to visit the little palaces sprinkled around Mt. Hou. However, for Youka, who was a new nyosen, she still needed a bit of time to get around.

"Why are the paths here so complicated...?"

Hearing Youka sighing like this, Teiei smiled.

"It's there to protect the Mt. Hou Kou! Just endure it for a little bit."

The land is shaped like a maze in order to prevent intrusion by outsiders.

Regular people or animals would not be able to make their way up the rocks. And although youju possess the ability to do so, they are generally not allowed into Houro Palace with only a few exceptions. Also, the paths through the strange rocks are very narrow, so those that come to visit must leave their mounts at the base and walk up to Houro Palace alone.

As soon as one steps onto the small paths, they will notice the interlocking grid, just like a labyrinth. The enormous crags will block your lines of sight. And amongst the rocks that are covered by the damp green moss, the elaborate stone slabs on the small paths have formed innumerable diverging roads and tunnels that cause people to lose their sense of direction in the blink of an eye.

Only those familiar with Houro Palace are able to find their way and arrive at that place, unique in this world, a high terrace full of plants and trees.

"So that's how it is."

Hidden in the deepest part of the maze is the Shashinboku, and on this tree, the fruit of the kirin grow.

In this world, whether human, beast, or any other living thing, they all grow in fruits on white trees. However, the only fruits that bear kirin grow on the Shashinboku on Mt. Hou.

Mt. Hou is the holy land where kirin are born. Houro Palace and the nyosen in it all exist for the sake of the kirin. The kirin are the masters of Mt. Hou, thus they are also called "Mt. Hou Kou."

Teiei nodded her head.

"There is no bigger responsibility than taking care of the kirin, but there is also no greater happiness. When the Taika hatches, you should also help us take care of him. However, you must be very careful."

Teiei's words made Youka's eyes glimmer.

"Can I help? Really?"

Actually, Youka had felt a little dissatisfied. Serving the kirin was an important job for the nyosen on Mt. Hou. The remaining jobs were only a few chores. There was a young kirin on Mt. Hou at the time, but because Youka was new, she had not been able to join the task of caring for the kirin.

Teiei laughed.

"But you have to figure out the lay of the land first."

"Yes!"

Youka nodded vigorously.

A few days ago, the Shashinboku finally bore another fruit, and this one was called "Taika."

Youka's thoughts had already drifted over onto that little fruit.

The time from when the Taika is formed to when the kirin is hatched is ten months. A newly born little kirin is extremely adorable. To be able to get so close to the little kirin in order to take care of it, she only had to think of such a situation and she would become so happy, she could not help but laugh.

More poppy flower petals floated from somewhere, silently dropping onto the surface of the water...

3

"Are those poppies?"

Someone from behind suddenly spoke to them, and Teiei stopped picking up the petals. She turned around and saw a woman coming out of Kaidou Palace, which was near Kaidou Spring.

Youka looked at the woman uncertainly as she had an unfamiliar face. She couldn't tell her age by her appearance. She looked like she was very young, but she also looked as if she had already passed middle age. She was wearing clothes and accessories that were more magnificent than the ordinary nyosen, and from this, Youka could tell that her status was definitely very high.

"Genkun!"

Teiei knelt hurriedly. This scared Youka and she quickly knelt down with Teiei.

This woman was the head of the nyosen at Houro Palace, Tensen Gyokujo Hekika Genkun--Gyokuyou.

"They're probably flowers from the poppy garden that were blown here by the wind."

Teiei replied. Gyokuyou lifted her pretty face and looked at the sky through an opening in the crags.

"The wind is blowing quite strangely today."

Gyokuyou wrinkled her brow as she stared at the sky for a moment, and then she turned to look at Youka.

"You're called Youka? Have you gotten used to life on Mt. Hou yet?"

Gyokuyou had spoken to Youka so suddenly that for a time, she didn't know quite what to do.

Before she became a nyosen, Youka had only heard Gyokuyou mentioned in legends, a distant figure. Now that this honorable goddess was standing right in front of her and had spoken to her, how could she not panic?

"Y...yes."

"But she still gets lost!"

Teiei grinned as she added this. Youka heard this and turned red again.

Gyokuyou's laugh sounded like a silver bell.

"Everyone is like this when they first arrive. Even Teiei got lost a long time ago. You'll be fine in a little while."

Youka secretly glanced at Teiei, who was also laughing.

"That's right. Youka's memory is much better than mine. She's also diligent and isn't afraid of getting tired."

Gyokuyou gave a tiny smile.

"That's wonderful."

Youka's face became a deeper red.

"N...no. I still make mistakes often and get lectured."

"Of course you'll get lectured before you become experienced. You shouldn't take it too seriously."

"Yes."

Gyokuyou looked at Youka, who was the kneeling down with her forehead earnestly on the ground, and smiled again. She then looked at Teiei who was also smiling at Youka.

"That's right, I've heard that the Nyokai of Tai has been born."

"Yes."

Gyokuyou did not often stay at Houro Palace. Her whereabouts drifted from place to place. Even Teiei didn't know where she ordinarily was, nor did she know when or where she would appear. Though Teiei was very curious, this was not something that a good nyosen could ask about.

"What's her name?"

"Sanshi."

"Where is Sanshi right now?"

"She is standing guard under the Shashinboku, never stepping away an inch."

When she heard Teiei say this, Gyokuyou raised her red lips into a smile.

"The devotion a nyokai has for her kirin is extremely deep!"

Teiei also smiled and nodded.

A kirin did not have parents, yet the nyokai was very similar to a kirin's parent, as she was responsible for protecting them. A nyokai's egg develops on the roots of the Shashinboku. When the fruit of a kirin forms on a tree branch, the nyokai will hatch on the following day. And then, for ten years as the fruit ripens, she will stand guard under the Shashinboku until the kirin is born.

"And the kirin's gender?"

Only a nyokai knows the gender of an unhatched kirin.

"He's called Taiki."

"I see."

A male kirin is named Ki, and a female is named Rin. The clan name of the kingdom is added before this, and the designation of a kirin is formed. This is a rule that has been passed on since very ancient times. The Ki of Tai Kingdom was growing on the Shashinboku, and the surname of Tai Kingdom is Tai. Thus, the name of this kirin is "Taiki."  
*[note: tai, the kingdom, and tai, its surname, have the same pronunciation, but different kanji.]*

Gyokuyou nodded her head, turned in the direction of the Shashinboku and started walking. Teiei and Youka lowered their heads to respectfully see her off.

It was then that suddenly the air began to tremble.

A strong wind violently blew into the small paths, as if it wanted to scrape everything off the face of the mountain.

Before they could even say anything, Teiei had already tumbled to the ground. The same had happened to Youka and she let out a scream.

A deep sound occurred all around and pieces broke off the crags. A strange roar came out of the entire maze.

"What's happening...?"

Though Teiei had heard Youka's frightened voice, she was not able to respond.

This was no simple storm or earthquake, for, if it had been, the symbol of the Eight Diagrams would certainly have shown it. Also, under the protection of gods and goddesses, a simple variation in the weather would not encroach upon Mt. Hou like this.

"Genkun, hide in the palace quickly!"

For the safety of the mistress, Teiei grasped the stone steps firmly with her fingers and wearily lifted her head to look towards Gyokuyou, only to find that Gyokuyou was standing firm, staring up at the sky.

The sky had turned red, as if it was covered with curtains of red mist.

"It's a shoku..."

Gyokuyou was not paying any attention to the earthquake, looking directly at the bright lights flying in the sky.

To be able to stand firm when that sudden, strong wind came shows that Gyokuyou had the strength of a goddess. However, Teiei did not currently have the spare time to express her admiration for this.

"Shoku...?"

She could feel that the entire current of the air was already completely twisted, rapidly moving nonstop. And with every movement, the red mist above her head would move about.

In a fissure in the red mist, an image revealed itself like a mirage.

"How...?"

A land that was not of this world drew near.

The soft petals of the poppy flower fluttered along with the strong wind and continuously hit Teiei on the face.

"Ah! The Taika's in danger...!"

4

Sanshi was crouched under a white tree branch, the wet moss making her skin itch. She looked at the fruit on the end of the branch with happiness.

This fruit, which bore the Taiki inside of it, would ripen in ten months.

After ten months, Sanshi's master will hatch out of this Taika--Taiki. Sanshi needed only to think about the moment that the ripe fruit cracked open and she became so happy that tears would flow from her eyes.

Just when Sanshi's heart was full of joy and pride, in that moment when she had lifted her head to look at the gleaming golden egg, something suddenly happened!

At first, Sanshi was at a loss for what was going on.

The air began to swirl into itself, destroying everything around Sanshi. A red tent-like fog covered the entirety of the sky. Fear made Sanshi's whole body tremble, when finally the word "shoku" floated into her mind.

She suddenly stood up as the fierce winds brushed at her feet. The white branch could not bear the pummeling of the wind, as it shook violently and creaked.

Sanshi shouted loudly and sprung towards the tree branch. She held the branch tightly and straightened her body up against the wind. Her wind-blown hair was messily tangled with the branches. In the violent shaking of the tree branches, a portion of her hair was torn out, but she didn't have time to acknowledge the pain on the top of her head. She thought with all her heart of only protecting the Taika. When she looked up toward the branch, all she saw was the twisting air.

"Taiki!"

The roaring wind continuously hit her body. She saw the already turbulent air spinning even more, as it opened up and devoured the branch.

"No!"

This was how the small golden fruit was drawn into the twisting air. That fruit that should only have been tenderly plucked by Sanshi after ten months, otherwise should never have left the branch, was harshly swept away.

"Help!"

Sanshi reached out and tried to save the fruit with both her hands, which had been scraped by tree branches and was dripping with blood. However, the distance between her hands and the fruit became farther and farther until she despaired.

"Someone come quickly!" Sanshi shouted with all her strength, but it only reached the end of her outstretched fingers before it dissipated in the wind.

The golden fruit gradually disappeared into whirlwind in this way.

The first sound that Sanshi made after she came into this world was the name of Taiki. And then who would have guessed that the second time she opened her mouth, it would be in a sorrowful crying--a crying that received no replies.

The end came just as suddenly as the beginning.

Sanshi stared blankly at the white branch.

There was no longer a golden radiance at the end of the branch, the solitary fruit had already disappeared leaving neither a shadow nor a trace.

"Sanshi!"

The sound came from all directions as a number of nyosen all ran towards Sanshi.

The first to arrive at Sanshi's side was Gyokuyou.

"Ah... Gyokuyou..."

Sanshi clutched tightly onto the two hands Gyokuyou had reached out.

First, she shouted Gyokuyou's name, and then she let out a sorrowful cry and began wailing.

"How could this happen...?"

Gyokuyou hugged this nyokai, who had been born not too long ago, as she gently stroked her wind-blown hair as

well as her scarred body.

"Of all times, it had to happen when the fruit of the kirin was growing..."

The nyokai at her chest was continuously letting out a mournful cry. Originally, in the ten months before the kirin hatched, the nyokai would not leave her post under the tree. The nyokai's feelings toward the kirin were that deep. Now this nyokai had watched wide-eyed as the kirin was taken from her. Gyokuyou could understand her pain.

"Don't worry."

She patted the nyokai's back.

"You don't have to cry like that, Sanshi. We will definitely find Taiki."

Gyokuyou said this quietly. In fact, she was also telling herself this.

"I will return Taiki to your side as quickly as is possible."

"Genkun..."

She nodded to Teiei, who had just arrived.

"Let Suzaku fly to every kingdom and quickly find the direction of the shoku!"

"Yes."

"It must be done before the moon rises. Quickly, assemble the nyosen and prepare to open the gate."

"Yes, I'll go immediately."

The nyosen scattered, and Gyokuyou looked up.

No matter how she looked, there remained no traces of the golden fruit on the white branch.

The shoku had begun on the west side of the Yellow Sea and had swept its way east.

On the Five Mountains, which are protected with divine might, and the even more closely guarded Houro Palace, all the flowers were fluttering about from the crush of the shoku. The shoku brings destruction to any kingdom it arrives at, but the nyosen of Mt. Hou were not concerned with this result. To them, the most important thing was the kirin.

The question was, where had the shoku taken the fruit?

Shoku are able to travel between this world and another. The worlds outside of this one are called "Hourai" and "Konron." It is said that Hourai lies on the edge of the world and Konron is situated on the other side where the sun never shines.

Regardless of whether this is true or false, the people of this world are unable to enter or pry into the other. Only shoku and the Gogou Gate, opened by the use of moon incantations, are able to connect the two worlds.

This world is surrounded on all sides by the Empty Sea. If the shoku continued east, the Taika would also follow it over the Empty Sea, until it reached the edge of the world--Hourai.

Though ordinary people are not able to travel to Hourai, nyosen are not ordinary people. On Gyokuyou's instruction, several nyosen passed through the Empty Sea searching for the Taika. However, the Taika's whereabouts were still not clear.

--This is how the kirin disappeared.

From that day forward, many people saw the shadow of Sanshi, east of Mt. Hou in the Yellow Sea, constantly searching back and forth.



## CHAPTER TWO



Youka spotted Sanshi just as she came out of the spirea tunnel.

At the end of the tunnel, there was a small, circular open area covered with soft green grass, and spireas had grown all over the surface of the crags around the vicinity. One bush was situated right on top of the tunnel with its long and thin white branches hanging down, as if it were a curtain of beads covering the entrance to the tunnel.

When Youka pulled aside the flower curtain, she saw Sanshi leap down from the top of the rocks.

Youka put down the bucket of water from Kaidou Spring that she had just filled.

Nyokai were able to traverse freely upon the crags, unlike people or horses. Thus, it was not unusual to see Sanshi jump down from above, but it had already been a long time since Sanshi had made an appearance.

"Sanshi, you're back."

The nyokai had passed through this maze and went to the east to look for the Taika. Whenever she traveled to a distant place, she would not ordinarily come back within the space of a month.

The nyosen at Houro Palace all knew the reason for her trips. She always searched until she was completely exhausted and came back with a weary look on her face.

"I just came back from getting some water. You should rest here for a little bit."

When Sanshi heard Youka say this, she obediently bent her four leopard legs and crouched under the spirea flowers with her snow-white body.

"But you were gone so long this time. Did you go to the edge of the Yellow Sea to search?"

If she could have, the nyokai would've liked to cross the Kongou Mountains at the edge of the Yellow Sea, to look even farther east. There was no living creature that could go over the Kongou Mountains. No one knew the reason, but this was a rule from very ancient times.

"Here, drink a little."

Youka pushed the wooden bucket to Sanshi's lips, and Sanshi drank water from the bucket.

She watched as Sanshi took a few gulps and then lifted her head. Youka took out an embroidered handkerchief from her sleeve and moistened it. She then gently wrung it dry and used it to cover Sanshi's foot. She had been supporting Sanshi with her hand, so she knew that Sanshi's feet were radiating heat.

"Ah, your feet are so swollen."

She wrapped Sanshi's claws with the cloth. Sanshi closed her eyes in relief, and leaned her head gently against the bunch of spirea flowers, her weight causing the flowers to drift down in succession.

A long time ago, all the spireas here had been pulled out with their roots, not one remaining.

--That was ten years ago.

"Comfortable? From now on, don't go so far."

Sanshi didn't reply, but Youka didn't mind, because Sanshi had always been like this.

The powerful shoku that had previously descended upon Houro Palace didn't alter the shape of the land on the Five Mountains, but the places and landscapes outside of the Five Mountains underwent a great change. The fruit of the white tree was thusly swept away to an unknown place.

At that time, the nyokai had wept profusely, but afterwards, no one ever heard a sound from her.

Youka used the handkerchief she had moistened and carefully applied it to Sanshi's legs.

"Does it still hurt? You should go to the river and soak them in the cold water."

She poured out the water that was now warm. Sanshi wordlessly stood up and walked aside.

However, Sanshi wasn't headed toward the river. She wanted to return to the Shashinboku. Youka knew this much, but she didn't stop her.

This was because Youka could understand Sanshi's feelings.

At first, Teiei had told her that after the fruit of the kirin hatched, Youka would be able to help take care of him.

When she was a part of the human world, she knew that the ordinary person didn't have the chance to see a kirin. When she had finally become a nyosen, taking care of Taiki was originally going to be her first meaningful job and also her first opportunity to come close to a kirin.

She would never have thought that the fruit would disappear like that. Youka, who had originally filled her heart with anticipation, had been disappointed by the loss. And because Sanshi lost the one she was to nurture, the breasts on her upper human half had shrunk to the size of a girl's, leaving only small bulges. In addition, the feet on her lower leopard half were now extremely red and swollen due to all the long-distance running she had been doing. Similar to Sanshi, Youka held in her heart the pain of emptiness.

The fruit had been swept away ten years ago. All the nyosen had said that Taiki would never return and that, in a short while, the Shashinboku would bear a new fruit. This would mean that the kirin who had disappeared had already died in an unknown place.

Though it had been like this, they still refused to give up hope. Since then, Sanshi still went back and forth through the east to search, and in her heart, Youka constantly thought of Taiki. Youka would pray for Sanshi, prepare a few necessities for her, and in her spare time, learn how to take care of a kirin. She could not help but want to do these things, and thus could empathize with Sanshi's pain. And Sanshi was the same. Of all the nyosen, she was closest to Youka.

After she watched Sanshi's tired frame leave, she picked up the water bucket.

When she turned her body, preparing to get more water, a nyosen moved the spirea flower curtain and came out of the tunnel.

"Isn't Sanshi here?"

Youka turned her head to look at the path that Sanshi had taken, but she could not see her outline anymore.  
"She went to the Shashinboku."  
"Can you quickly go get her?"  
"But I have to go get water..."  
"This is an order from Genkun."  
Youka opened her eyes widely.  
"I think we've found out where Taiki is."

2

Youka rushed to get Sanshi, and then the two of them ran to Hakki Palace to see Gyokuyou.  
All the buildings in Houro Palace are either palaces or temples. Because the crags are able to block the wind and the weather on Mt. Hou is inherently good, neither cold nor hot, the buildings only need to have roofs as shelter from the rain.

Youka walked on the small paths, ran up five sections of white stone stairs, and hurried onto the white stone floor of the palace. At the same time, Teiei was also running in.

"I've brought Sanshi here."

Youka kneeled upon the octagonal floor. Gyokuyou nodded her head from the chair in which she was sitting.

Teiei lifted her head.

"Have they found the Taika like I've heard?"

"The Kirin of En helped us find it."

"Then it must be right!"

This was almost a miracle. All the nyosen on Mt. Hou had already lost all hope. In Mt. Hou's history, there had never been a kirin that was found after being lost for ten years. Kirin have drifted to Hourai before, but they were all found and returned within five years. The length of ten years was really so long that Teiei was shocked.

Gyokuyou smiled.

"It should be right... Since the kirin drifted to Hourai, it has turned into a taika, but a kirin can still sense another kirin's spirit. Thus, I asked the kirin of various kingdoms if they could cross the Empty Sea to look for Taiki. We finally received some news today."

After the fruit was taken away by the shoku, in another kingdom, it was deposited in the womb of a woman and turned into a taika.

"Was he discovered by En Taiho?"

Gyokuyou used her glazed fan to cover her lips as she laughed.

"It seems as if En Taiho often crosses the Empty Sea to go to Hourai. I have always thought that if anyone could find the Taika, it would be him. I didn't think that I would have guessed right."

Actually, kirin often run all over the place and it's not particularly special, but right now, no one concerned themselves with that.

"We heard that he had discovered a kirin in Hourai. Currently, the only kirin whose whereabouts are unknown is Taiki, so it should be him."

"Yes..."

With this talk, it seemed as if the kirin would really return!

"Then I should assemble the nyosen immediately..."

Gyokuyou interrupted Teiei mid-sentence.

"There's no need."

"But..."

Gyokuyou turned to look at a blankly-staring Sanshi, who was standing behind Teiei and Youka. She set her fan on the table and then reached out with both hands.

"Sanshi, come here."

Sanshi slowly strode toward Gyokuyou.

"I told you that we would find Taiki and bring him back. I didn't trick you, did I?"

Gyokuyou took Sanshi's hand.

"Please forgive us for making you wait so long."

She patted Sanshi's hand.

"There's a gate where the roots of the Shashinboku are. You should go. And this time, use your hands to pull Taiki back to us."

Sanshi's round eyes filled with tears, but she didn't cry. She turned and flew out the door.

Gyokuyou squinted to see Sanshi's figure getting farther and farther away. She waited until Sanshi turned onto a small path and was not visible anymore. She turned to Teiei and laughed cheerfully.

"At last, a season of celebration has come to Mt. Hou!"

Sanshi ran as fast as she could. When she arrived at the nest of her birth--the bottom part of the Shashinboku, she saw a young woman standing under the trunk of the tree. The woman was pointing down towards her feet where there was a round hole giving off a white glow.

Many nyosen had already gathered here, but Sanshi did not have the time to pay them any attention. She ran straight to that woman.

The Shashinboku was on an enormous rock at the side of a cliff. The woman was standing right next to a root on top of a rock covered in moss.

Aside the woman's feet was a silver ring. On closer inspection, the ring wasn't a ring at all. It was a snake. This silvery-white snake had two tails and a curved body. One of its tails was held in its mouth, forming a circle.

This snake gave off a shallow glow, as if rays of light were shining on it from the sky and a glow was coming from the green moss under it.

Sanshi stopped. The woman smiled beautifully and reached her right hand out towards Sanshi. The other tail of the snake was wrapped around this hand.

"You must be Sanshi."

Sanshi looked at her and then at the glowing ring of the snake. The ring was about as wide as a circle formed with one's arms, and inside, pale white shadows formed a tunnel. At the end of the tunnel there was another round hole, and through that small hole, she could only see a very unusual sort of building, an area that appeared to be a yard, and a round, golden shadow. However, for Sanshi, this was already enough.

--Taiki!

No matter what, there was no way she wouldn't recognize that golden shadow. It was Taiki!

"You should go in. However, no matter what happens, you must not let go of my hand."

Sanshi didn't recognize this woman, but right now, she didn't care.

Sanshi held onto her hand, and stepped into the glowing ring. She felt cool air coming at her. At the exit of the tunnel, white snowflakes were fluttering about, like the petals of the spirea.

When she reached the beginning of the tunnel of white light, she suddenly felt her body become more nimble, as she already didn't know where she was. The woman followed Sanshi tightly from behind.

"Keep walking forward."

Hearing the woman say this, Sanshi strode forward. She walked to the end of the tunnel and reached her hand out. She could now see the scene more clearly. Cold snowflakes were flying everywhere, and a golden shadow was floating in the dark air. This was what she saw.

A closer look at the glimmering shadow would reveal that it was actually the silhouette of a small boy. However, in Sanshi's eyes, it was a fruit, the same one that she should have plucked from the white branch ten years ago. This fruit had a shiny golden surface and was just big enough that she would be able to wrap her hands around it.

Sanshi did her best to reach out with her fingers, but she just wasn't able to touch that fruit. She tightened her grip on the woman's hand and, holding the cold air open with her front paws, she reached out even further and beckoned to the fruit. And then she saw the fruit begin to drift towards her.

This was the moment she had been dreaming of for so long!

Sanshi tightly grasped the fruit that had drifted over to her hand.

She pulled the fruit towards her and it fell into her embrace.

3

When he neared to the white hand, it didn't hesitate at all in grabbing hold of his wrist.

Different from his cold skin, that hand made him feel very warm.

Originally, he had wanted to walk towards the hand because he wanted to find out how someone could hide in the small crevice between the storehouse and the wall. However, when he got close, the view of his surroundings suddenly changed in the blink of an eye. It was as if his pupil had been covered by a thin layer of water, so everything that he saw became blurry, their outlines disappearing.

After the hand took hold of his wrist, his body felt as if it drifted into the air, as a burst of energy pulled him toward an unknown place.

He went through a white space filled with a clear mist. He had no idea where he was, but his intuition faintly told him that it was a gentle place.

It was even warmer inside. Moreover, a warm breeze was blowing onto him from a place he didn't know.

His feet didn't feel like they were stepping on anything hard, but neither did he feel like they were stepping on something soft. He thought that perhaps this was what walking on clouds felt like.

He sensed someone beside him, sturdily holding on to his hand, but he could not see who it was. Through the dense fog, he could barely see a milky white figure swaying, but that might have been just his imagination.

So it stayed like this for a moment, and then the hand that was holding on to his wrists pulled him in another direction. He didn't know why, but he wasn't frightened at all. He just obediently went wherever the hand pulled him.

In the amount of time it approximately takes to walk through a short hallway, he finally saw the sky again, as if he had floated to the surface of a pool.

To suddenly see the dazzling sunlight shocked him momentarily.

Towering in front of him was a great tree. He had never before seen a snow-white tree trunk that looked as if it was made with a pure white metal. The tree trunk was very thick, but not very tall. White branches extended a long way with their ends hanging down.

Behind the tree, he saw marvelous landscapes for the first time in his life. He also saw a strangely-shaped, enormous

green rock and a group of unusually dressed women.

Also, the strangest of all was the woman who had been holding on to his hand.

She looked like she was half-human and half-tiger or leopard. Her face was flat and her round eyes were opened wide and radiating a glimmer that was hard to describe. He should have felt scared, but for a reason he didn't understand, he was not. On the contrary, he sensed that those eyes were very gentle.

"Taiki..."

This word came from the lips of the half-woman, half-beast. However, he didn't understand what it meant. And he also didn't know that this was the first time she had spoken in ten years.

"Taiki!"

She used her soft hands to gently stroke his hair, as her round eyes filled with tears.

Like he had always done very naturally with his mother, he held her hand and drew closer to her face.

"Did something happen that hurt you?"

She shook her head not as if she was saying no to Taiki's question, but that he not worry about her. This action was also very similar to something his mother would have done.

"Taiki? So, is he Taiki?"

It was because of this human voice that finally triggered a realization of his surroundings. Just when he was wondering what strange thing had happened to him, a woman approached him.

"This is very rare."

"Who are you?"

The woman kneeled in front of him.

"I am Gyokuyou. I have probably not seen hair like yours for hundreds of years."

The woman raised her hand and ran her fingers through his hair.

"You are a kokki, a black kirin! This really is very rare."

"Is that weird?" he asked.

He was not looking at the woman who was standing in front of him, but at the half-woman, half-beast beside him holding his hand. He didn't know why, but in his heart, he had already recognized this half-woman, half-beast as someone he could rely on.

She once again shook her head silently.

"Of course it's not weird. This is a very good thing!" said the woman standing in front of him.

"Since you were born in another world, you were probably already given a name. However, here we will call you Taiki."

"Taiki? Why is that?"

"Because this is the rule."

"What is this place? I was just standing in the yard."

He had already realized that what had happened to him wasn't ordinary, but he had not yet come upon anything that would inspire fear or panic in him.

"This is Mt. Hou. This is where you stay."

"I...don't think I understand."

"You will understand in the days to come. Oh, that's right. This is Sanshi, called Haku Sanshi, and her particular responsibility is to take care of you."

He lifted his head to look at the half-woman, half-beast at his side.

"Sanshi..."

Gyokuyou then looked to the side again.

"This is Ren Taiho."

A golden-haired woman was standing next to the white tree trunk. When he followed Gyokuyou's line of sight, he was just able to see the white snake curled around the golden-haired woman's wrist turn into a silver bracelet. That snake had had two tails, and he thought he saw the second tail turn into a silver ring, but because he was so astonished, consequently he didn't dare decide if what he had seen was real or not.

"You should thank her. In order to help Sanshi get you back, she specially lent us her very precious treasure."

He look up to see the golden-haired woman smiling and then glanced at Sanshi again. Sanshi nodded at him, so he then obediently turned toward the golden-haired woman and bowed.

"Thank you."

The golden-haired woman just smiled. Gyokuyou, who had been watching the scene satisfyingly, suddenly straightened up and turned to leave.

"Ah! Gyokuyou..."

"Taiki, you must call me Lady Gyokuyou."

Taiki looked up at Sanshi.

"You should call her Lady Gyokuyou."

Taiki nodded. He didn't know why, but he didn't doubt anything Sanshi said. Even though Sanshi called him Taiki, a name he had never heard before, he felt like he should always have been called by this name, because it had come out of Sanshi's mouth.

"Lady Gyokuyou... I feel like all of this is very unimaginable!"

He didn't quite know how to express his feelings of uncertainty.

Gyokuyou smiled as she looked at him.

"You will get used to it very soon. Just ask Sanshi if there is anything you don't understand."

Once again, he looked up at Sanshi. Sanshi gave him a smile--Sanshi didn't really have any expression on her face, but he thought he saw a small trace of a smile.

"Yes."

He tightened his hold on Sanshi's hand, and he felt Sanshi reply with an even stronger squeeze.

4

"Sanshi, Sanshi! Let us get a good look at this child!"

"Come here, Taiki. I'll help you change your clothes."

"Don't change your clothes yet. Have a drink of water. Or did you want eat a peach?"

"There are still plums and pears."

After Gyokuyou and the woman wearing the bracelet left, the nyosen swarmed upon him, leaving Taiki surrounded and not knowing what to do.

Although the smiling faces of the nyosen let Taiki know that they were welcoming him, this situation was still a little too unusual. He held onto Sanshi's hand tightly and leaned towards her. The nyosen saw this and laughed.

"Ah, he just wants to be with Sanshi!"

"Sanshi, you can't have him all to yourself!"

"Taiki, come over here."

Finally Teiei could not watch this any longer.

"Taiki won't know what do with all of you like this. Everyone calm down a little bit, and let Sanshi take care of Taiki."

After saying this, Teiei turned to Youka, who had been standing to one side. "Take Taiki back to the palace. It should be better to take him to Rosen Palace."

Teiei knew that up until now Youka had been preparing Rosen Palace for Taiki's return. Youka looked gratefully at Teiei for a moment and then vigorously nodded her head.

Youka walked slowly to Taiki and kneeled down so that she and Taiki were at the same height. Taiki looked straight at her.

"Your servant wholeheartedly welcomes your return."

Taiki felt the arm, which Sanshi had laid upon his shoulders in order to protect him, loosen. Sanshi gently pressed him forward, closer to the kneeling Youka.

"May I ask who you are?"

"I'm called Youka."

"Lady Youka..." He had only said this much before the nyosen that surrounded him burst out again in laughter. Youka's face carried a smile upon it as well.

"Please just call me Youka. You only need to address Genkun as Lady."

"Genkun?"

"She is Lady Gyokuyou."

Taiki looked at Sanshi, and Sanshi nodded. Thus, Taiki accepted this way of speaking.

"Then... Youka, who are you? Why do you call my arrival a return?"

"I am a nyosen who lives here on Mt. Hou, and you, Taiki, are the master of Mt. Hou. In fact, you were born here!"

Taiki's eyes widened and he stared at Youka for a moment.

"I was born here...?"

"Yes." Youka nodded. "You could also say that this is your homeland."

"But..."

Youka shook her head to stop Taiki from continuing.

"We could not find you because a change occurred in the world and you drifted to another place. We really searched for you for a very long time." An expression of both joy and uneasiness crossed Youka's face. "We were all so worried, because we didn't know where you were or what kind of life you were living. You've finally come back, which is something that we are all very happy about. We truly welcome your return."

Taiki only stared blankly at Youka.

So he wasn't the child of his parents.

When this thought occurred to him, it was as if all his uncertainties had been resolved. He now had a very good explanation for why his grandmother disliked him so much and for why he never felt like he fit into his surroundings.

In truth, he had never really gotten along with his family. That wasn't what he had wanted, so he had tried hard to improve relations with his family. However, it seemed like they always had a chasm between them that was too wide to jump over.

Like many children, he thought about all the ways that he was not similar to other people. He wouldn't have thought that his feelings were right.

"Then...is Sanshi my real mother?" He looked back and forth between Sanshi and Youka and saw them both shake their heads.

"Sanshi is your servant. It is her personal responsibility to take care of you. And I am a nyosen. My responsibility is to handle a few chores so that your time at Mt. Hou is even more comfortable."

"Then where is my real mother?"

Youka looked up at the tree. "You were hatched from a fruit that grew on this tree. This is Tentei's blessing."

Taiki also looked up at the white tree. Not only was there no fruit on the tree right now, but there was also not one flower or leaf. Taiki still understood too little about the creation of life, so he didn't have any difficulty in believing any of the things that Youka had said.

Taiki imagined that when season arrived for the fruit to grow, that tree would certainly be full of red fruit. And the fruit must be very big if he had first jumped out from one of them.

Though he did feel that using this method to arrive in the world was a little strange, he had always thought that he had been different from most people. He understood now that it all had to do with how he had been born.

(So it had all been because of this.)

It was all because he had been taken in from the outside that his grandmother hated him. He probably also created a problem for his mother. Because he had come down from a tree, he was never able to win the love of his grandmother or parents.

--He didn't have parents. He didn't know exactly why, but he didn't have real parents.

These thoughts didn't seem illogical to him, so he believed them without a shadow of doubt. This way of thinking was very reasonable to him and had no trouble spots for him. However, it also made him feel bad.

"What's the matter?"

When he suddenly heard Youka ask him this, he hurriedly closed his mouth and shook his head vigorously. Sanshi pulled him closer, as if to comfort him, so he leaned his whole body onto her.

--Now he knew.

(I wasn't originally born to my parents.)

Several memories floated into his head.

He remembered his grandmother's looks of contempt and his father's reprimands. No matter how hard he tried, he could never meet their expectations. And whenever his mother argued with his father or grandmother over him, which was often, she would always end up hiding in the bathroom alone and secretly weep. His brother was also often lectured, but he always accused him for making him do it.

"I don't know what to do with him," his young teacher had said. "He doesn't get along with any of his classmates, so I don't know what would be the best thing for me to do."

She had looked at him with concern. "For a child his age not to have any friends at school is a pretty serious problem."

His grandmother had pursed her wrinkled lips in dissatisfaction. "Why doesn't anyone want to be your friend?"

"Mother, don't be like this. It's the other kids who are purposefully excluding him."

"Well, that's just because there's a problem with his personality. Why can't he just get along with his classmates?"

"Because he's a scaredy-cat! That's why no one plays with him!"

"Don't interrupt! You only know how to bully people. It's all because your mother didn't teach you guys right that both of you have let us down. Is our family not going to have any children who make anything of themselves?"

"Mother..."

After his grandmother's nagging, in the end she would always come to the conclusion that it was his mother's fault. That's why his mother would always hide in the bathroom and cry.

"Why are you this way?" His father would look at him and sigh, but he didn't know how to respond to that.

"Isn't it possible for you to behave yourself so that your grandmother doesn't get angry?"

"I'm sorry." He could only say this.

"All because of you that I get lectured as well! Every time you get grandmother angry, she lectures me too!"

"I'm sorry." He was always apologizing.

Regardless of how hard he tried, the situation never took a turn for the better.

He hadn't understood why it was like this. He could only think that his presence itself made his family unhappy. He had often felt that were he not to exist, his family would be able to live together happily.

(So it really is like this.)

He really wasn't like them.

(I'm not originally a part of their family.)

When he thought back to his family at that moment, he still felt its warmth. He missed his father and his mother, and his grandmother and his brother.

Perhaps if he put more effort into it, everything would change. No one would have to get mad or cry because of him.

(But I can't go back again.)

At this thought, he couldn't hold back the tears any longer.

Yet those weren't homesick tears; they were tears of goodbye.

He knew that he would never again return to that family.

### CHAPTER THREE

1

"Are you awake?"

Hearing Sanshi's voice, Taiki rubbed his eyes, and then suddenly opened them up and stared at the ceiling for a moment.

The white ceiling was made of a milky stone with a design carved upon its entire surface. A bird was cut into each corner, matching intricate flower and grass patterns that surrounded a circular design engraved in the center. Though the ceiling wasn't painted, it had been set with a multitude of different colored stones.

"What bird is that?" he asked as he pointed at one of the birds in the corner.

"That..."

It looked as if Sanshi didn't know how to answer, so he responded with an "Oh!" In truth, he didn't really want to know what bird that was. It was just that because he had suddenly remembered his crying yesterday, he felt a little embarrassed.

"What time is it right now?"

He had made up his mind and turned to look at Sanshi. This was a small room, just smaller than his study at home. A thin, beautiful covering had been laid upon the floor, and pillow-like cushions filled three sides of the walls. The top portion of the white stone walls were inlaid with small stones, forming the image of a tree.

Only one side was without a wall, having layers of curtains instead. The curtains were rolled up now, and Sanshi was standing on that side.

Sanshi puzzlingly tilted her head.

"Well, what am I supposed to do right now? Don't I have to go to school?"

Taiki knew that his life had undergone a tremendous change. He had a feeling that nothing would be like it had been before, being awakened by an alarm clock, and then changing into his uniform, washing his face, eating breakfast, and going to school.

"What should I do now?"

"You don't have to do anything," said Sanshi as she shook her head. "Would you like to get out of bed?"

Hearing Sanshi ask him this, he took it to mean that he could get up, or he could continue sleeping. He didn't know if these were temporary privileges or if it would always be like this, but he didn't really care either way.

"Yes, I'm getting up."

Taiki sat up in the small room.

When he saw Sanshi stand up, he realized that this small room was a step higher than the ground. Behind the curtain were doors carved with decorative flower designs, and through the doors he could see another room.

Taiki curiously looked around at the small room he was in and the room outside. Yesterday, he had cried very hard under the tree, so hard that he had felt a little embarrassed, and afterwards he had wearily fallen asleep. Thus, someone had carried him into this room, and it wasn't until this morning that he had gotten a good look at it.

He discovered that this room let people feel at ease, while the other room also looked very comfortable. The other room appeared not to have any walls, but stone railings instead, and beyond the room were cliffs covered in green moss. The light shining between the cliffs and the building made the moss gleam. The grass and small bushes on the cliffs had grown into the room, and this gave Taiki a fresh feeling.

Sanshi walked in, carrying a water bucket and a ladle. She set the bucket on a table in the corner and called Taiki over. Taiki rolled out of bed and walked over beside Sanshi.

"Good morning."

Sanshi smiled and told Taiki to sit down. He did as she said. He discovered that he wasn't wearing any clothes, but he didn't care. This was because Sanshi and Youka and all the other nyosen wore styles of clothing that he had never seen before, so he figured that here, things were done differently than usual.

Though he was naked, he didn't feel cold, nor did he feel hot. He thought that it must have been a moderate season.

Sanshi used a very peculiar method to wash his face. Even though this made him feel like a little kid and a little embarrassed, he didn't resist. Sanshi took the bucket outside and brought in a pile of clothes. He felt those clothes looked a lot like the kind his grandmother wore.

When she was dressing him, Sanshi kept her silence. He thought that she sure was a quiet person, but it didn't make him feel awkward. After he was dressed, Sanshi took his hand and lead him to the room next door. He saw a table in the center of the room on which a breakfast had been set, and Youka standing next to it.

"Good morning, Youka."

Youka smiled with joy. "Good morning. Did you sleep well last night?"

"Very well. Did you make this breakfast?"

"No, another person is specially assigned to make your breakfast."

Taiki looked at her with surprise. "Then is there also someone who's specially assigned to sweep?"

"Yes. Well now, please eat before your food gets cold."

I've become the child of a rich family, thought Taiki, though in reality, he didn't actually know people like that.

He raised his hand to receive the long, white chopsticks that Youka handed over to him.

He looked over the food on the table, none of which he recognized, and then he looked at Youka and Sanshi.

"Aren't you guys eating?"

"Sanshi doesn't eat, and I've already eaten."

"But I can't finish this all by myself."

There were many dishes on the table, big and small.

"It's okay if you can't finish everything."

"Is it because I slept late that everyone's already eaten?"

Youka laughed. "Sanshi doesn't need to eat anything, but if she did, her status does not permit her to eat with you."

Taiki tilted his head. Although he had heard of the word "status," he still didn't quite understand what Youka meant.

"Can't you all eat with me? Even if I woke up earlier?"

"No."

Taiki gave the food on the table a confused look. "Why?"

"It's probably a rule here, but..."

"Hm?" Taiki looked up at Youka.

"It would make be feel very strange, because... um..." Youka's head went askew as she searched for the words.

"If you're punishing me for sleeping late by making me eat all alone, then I can understand. But there are other people here and I'm the only one eating. That makes me feel weird. I think the food would taste better if everyone ate together."

"Well," Youka said quietly as she laughed. Then she nodded her head and called out towards a screen in another corner of the room, "You should all take a short break. Taiki wants to eat with everybody!"

It looked as if there was yet another room behind the screen.



2

After breakfast, Youka took Taiki to visit the surroundings.

Taiki held Sanshi's hand as he stepped outside and stared dumbfoundedly for a moment.

There were no walls outside of the building, nor doors or windows, and the entrance was shielded by only a screen.

Three flights of stone steps led downward onto a small path, but here, there was no courtyard or gate. Although a relatively large space existed in front of the steps, it was almost the same as coming out of the building and facing a cliff wall.

The strange crags towered so high above that Taiki could not see the sky without tilting his head back. The small paths, which extended outward in three directions, were extremely narrow, and standing on one was like standing in a small alley between two tall buildings. Looking back at the building he had just stepped out of, he felt like it had shrunk, as if it was a small house hidden amongst skyscrapers.

"This place is really beyond imagination," Taiki absent-mindedly mumbled to himself. When Youka heard this, she laughed.

"Is it?"

"This question might be a little weird, but what is this place?"

Youka tilted her head to the side. "This is Mt. Hou."

"Oh... I wasn't asking about that. I was talking about..." Taiki wracked his brain for a way to express his doubts.

"This place should be pretty far from my house, right? I would like to know just how far is it actually? Where in Japan is this? Or are we not inside the country?"

Even though no one here was speaking a foreign language, everything was so unusual that he felt like it wasn't Japan.

"Or have I arrived in a fantasy world?" It was like something depicted in a manga where a secret passage inside of a



wardrobe leads to a fantasy world.

Youka puzzlingly tilted her head. "I think it should be like that..."

"Oh..." He felt that this was unimaginable. Everything in front of his eyes appeared to be reality, but there was a big gap between this reality and the real world that he recognized.

He thought carefully about what exactly was "reality" and what "reality" could be. The more he thought, the more confused he got, until he let out a heavy sigh and decided never to tackle this problem again.

"Is there flat terrain here?"

"Yes, I'll take you there."

After they took a few steps, Youka turned and looked at the building behind them. "That is Rosen Palace. It is a residence that has been specially prepared for you."

"Then, it's my home?"

"Yes. After you've been living here longer, if you feel there's a better palace, please let us know at any time."

"I can move too?"

Youka laughed a little bit. "Of course you can! You are the master of Houro Palace. You may live wherever you like."

Taiki angled his head. They followed the narrow path and walked to the intersection between a gentle slope and a tunnel.

"Actually...this is something I don't really understand."

"Hm?"

"Houro Palace... that's right here, right?"

"Yes."

"Why would I be the master of this place?"

Taiki felt uncertain. No matter if it was Youka, Sanshi or any of the other nyosen, there were many that were older than he, especially Gyokuyou, who looked even more dignified. He didn't understand why he was the master and not any of the other people. No matter how he looked at it, it didn't make any sense.

Youka had a troubled smile on her face. "Because you are a kirin."

"What is a kirin?"

"A kirin is what is born from that tree from yesterday."

Suddenly, a little light popped into Taiki's head.

"Then, are there others like me?"

"Yes. Besides you, there are eleven others."

"Including me, there are twelve total?"

"Yes. Ren Taiho, whom you met yesterday, is also a kirin."

"Was it that lady who was wearing a bracelet?"

"Yes."

"Then do I have another opportunity to see her?"

Youka shook her head. "Ren Taiho has already gone back."

He thought that this was unfortunate. If he hadn't cried so much yesterday that he cried himself to sleep, perhaps he could have talked to Ren Taiho about many things.

"Then where are the rest of the kirin? Can I meet them?"

Youka laughed. "Everyone has already gone to their respective kingdoms. Perhaps you will run into them after you have also descended."

"Descended?"

"You will choose a ruler, and then you will leave Mt. Hou."

"A ruler? There's a ruler?"

"Yes, and he will become your master."

"Master?"

"A kirin will choose a ruler, and then he will serve the ruler. And it is the duty of us here on Mt. Hou to take care of you before that happens."

So that's how it is, Taiki thought. In the future, he will work as a servant to the ruler. As to which ruler he will work at the side of, only the future can decide. And before that, he will stay on Mt. Hou, which is probably similar to living a pious life.

When he thought all of this through, he finally got a little bit of relief from the uncertainties that had occupied his mind since yesterday.

"But am I qualified enough for such an important job?"

"Well," Youka sigh again and laughed. "Of course you can! Because you are a kirin."

"Is a kirin's job to work at the side of a ruler?"

"Yes."

"Do the other kirin also do this?"

Youka nodded and began to list it out. "There are a total of twelve kingdoms here, and every kingdom has a ruler. There are also twelve kirin. There will always be a kirin at the side of a ruler. This is how things are."

"Oh..."

"But right now, there are only eleven rulers. The ruler of the kingdom situated in the northeast, Tai Kingdom, passed away ten years ago, and a successor has not been chosen yet."

"Then what about the Kirin of Tai Kingdom?"

Youka smiled and looked at Taiki. "Isn't he right here?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you are the Kirin of Tai Kingdom, so that's why we call you Taiki. You will eventually choose a ruler. This is the duty of a kirin."

Taiki blinked his eyes. "Is it right to let me decide such an important thing?"

Youka nodded her head energetically. "This is something only you can decide. ...Ah, this is the mulberry garden."

3

After not too long a time, Taiki became accustomed to life on Mt. Hou: the unusual clothes, the strange customs, and the vegetarian meals.

Even though there were so many remarkable things, Taiki was still little enough that he didn't fuss over them as an adult might. Especially since he never felt that this way of life was an inconvenience or unsuitable to him, so he very naturally took to it.

If there was just one thing he had trouble adapting to though, it would have to do with the fact that his appearance had changed. The mirrors here did not reflect as clearly as they did back at his old home, but, although he understood this much, he still felt as if his reflection in the mirrors was not the same as it used to be, no matter how he looked at it.

He had never looked at himself very closely in the mirror before, so he wasn't able to say where exactly he was different, but the person in the mirror looked like someone else. He didn't know the reason, but it was as if the change had occurred when he had first gone through the tunnel full of white mist.

Right now he had also felt out clearly his own role on Mt. Hou. The nyosen would take care of the organization of an ordinary day. All he had to do was to get up at a proper time and go to bed at a proper time. When he was awake, he wasn't required to do anything. He just looked around everywhere and asked the nyosen questions, all in order to get basic knowledge about life on Mt. Hou. This was his homework on Mt. Hou.

The nyosen who protected Taiki and carried with them an unmatched love and at the same time an endless concern, could finally stop worrying.

"In the beginning I was really so fretful," said one of the nyosen who were spreading a cloth over jasmine flowers in order to dry it in the sun. The scent of the flowers covered by the cloth became stronger.

"After all, there has never been a kirin that has spent more than ten years away from Mt. Hou."

Youka also lifted a cloth up and gazed at that other nyosen briefly. "It doesn't matter how many years they've been gone. A kirin is always a kirin. It's not like they'll change."

"I guess you're right."

The other nyosen who were folding cloths all laughed. The cloths had all absorbed the smell of the jasmine flowers and were giving off a clear fragrance.

"But in any case, he did grow up in Hourai, so there are still some things that are strange about him. Fortunately, none of it makes anyone uncomfortable."

Youka heard this and put her hands on her hips. "How can you say that Taiki is strange!? He's much easier to approach than the kirin who are born and grow up on Mt. Hou! If anything, we should be grateful!"

The nyosen who were folding clothes around the area burst into laughter.

"Youka really favors Taiki!"

"So what!?"

The nyosen completely surrounded the determined Youka and waved the cloths around her feet as if they were performing the ribbon dance, and then with another shout, they spread out.

Teiei watched them and couldn't help but laugh as well. "All right, you girls stop picking on Youka."

The nyosen of Mt. Hou are generally a very lively bunch, but because their work is to take care of kirin, if a kirin is not around, they can get low-spirited as well. Especially in a situation like before when they didn't even know the whereabouts of the kirin, they had all been like balloons that had lost their air.

Of course, there isn't always a kirin on Mt. Hou. In fact, the length of time when they are away is probably greater than when they are present. When the kirin aren't there, the nyosen still draw water, wash clothes or weave fabrics regardless. Everything they do is for themselves, so they do it all without much enthusiasm. However, right now things were not like that! Right now, a kirin was living on Mt. Hou!

Therefore, all the nyosen were also very excited. The nyosen were very fond of kirin, especially toward this one. In actuality, none of the nyosen really had the liberty to laugh at Youka for favoring Taiki, because of the fifty-some nyosen, almost all of them adored him.

In regard to their poking fun at Youka's favoritism, it was probably a little bit of envy because Taiki and Youka were comparatively closer.

"Youka!" A crisp and clear child's voice came from far away.

All the nyosen stopped what they were doing and turned to look at where the voice had come from. Just then, Taiki came down a path, running towards the open area.

"Hide me! Hide me!" said Taiki between breaths as he ran toward Youka and hid behind her.

"Taiki just wants to be friends with Youka!"

"That's what I was saying!"

The nyosen laughed and used the cloths they were holding to cover Taiki up. The little body that hid between the jasmine bushes and Youka was completely covered by the cloths in the blink of an eye.

The nyosen giggled. At this time, a shadow appeared on the ground. It was Sanshi coming down from the rocks. The nyosen then all pointed to the eastern path.

"He's over there, Sanshi!"

"Taiki ran that way."

"I almost knocked him over!"

Even though the nyosen tried to trick Sanshi, there was no way she wouldn't be able to find Taiki. She walked directly over to Youka and lifted up the cloth that was covering him. Taiki, who had been hiding inside with neck crunched up, looked up at her and sighed forcefully. "You still found me."

Still panting heavily, he sat down and hugged Sanshi's foreleg. Sanshi handed the fabric and clothes back to the nyosen and rubbed his head. The nyosen laughed joyously.

"It's impossible to hide from Sanshi."

"I know," said Taiki, as his cheeks turned red. He leaned on Sanshi's foreleg and loosened the collar of his robe. Everyone stifled their laughter and watched him. They all thought that Taiki looked much cuter than any of the kirin who had stayed at Mt. Hou before--It was probably because of their favoritism.

Youka laughed as she stroked Taiki's hair. His hair had grown much longer since he first arrived, and his bangs stuck to his forehead because of his sweat. She gently lifted it aside.

Most kirin had golden hair, but to be accurate, it should be called a mane, rather than hair. Furthermore, Taiki's mane was the color of steel. This showed that he was not like most kirin, and it caused the nyosen to feel that he was particularly dignified.

"You should go bathe for a bit. It's almost time for dinner."

The status of a kirin is much higher than that of a nyosen, but since they take care of a kirin's everyday life, they feel as if the kirin was their own child. Thus, it follows that the tone of their voice isn't overly respectful. Even the head of the nyosen, Hekika Genkun is like this, so naturally no one can blame them.

"Luckily, there is a lot of clothes here for you to change into. I'll tidy up here and then I'll come find you."

"Okay." Taiki nodded and stood up. "Sanshi, let's go."

The nyosen smiled as they watched Sanshi leave, holding on to Taiki's hand.

"It looks like the one who favors Taiki most is Sanshi!"

"That's right!"

Though they all agreed, none of them felt jealous, because Sanshi and the nyosen were not the same. Sanshi existed solely for Taiki. Moreover, they were all in a good mood, because anyone who saw Taiki before dinner could eat with him. This was the newest unwritten rule upon Mt. Hou.

4

After she put away the sun-dried clothes, Youka chose a set that smelled like sun and jasmine for Taiki and walked to the river. She used a path by a waterfall that ran beside Rosen Palace, and after she turned a corner, she heard crisp and clear laughter.

In the river, Taiki was chasing Sanshi's tail around. One moment, it floated up out of the water, and the next, it sunk back down. Even when he got a hold of her tail, she would lift it up high, sending him back into the water, and then he would surface again with a splash. At this time, he noticed Youka walking towards him and waved to her.

"I've come to see you."

"Thank you."

A nyosen spread a cloth at the side of the river. Taiki walked up onto the blanket on the bank, and another nyosen used the cloth that was hanging at her wrist to wrap around Taiki.

"I can do this myself."

"You never completely dry your upper back, so I think you should still let me do it." After the nyosen said this, she began to wipe down Taiki's body. Even though Taiki felt very embarrassed, all the nyosen wanted to attend to him. And then yet another nyosen helped him put his clothes on, as Youka dried his hair for him.

"I think it's okay already."

"But your hair isn't dry yet."

He took a few tufts of hair in his hand as it rolled off the cloth. His hair had now become an unusual color between black and silver.

"Is my hair too long?"

"Right now, it's still too short!"

Taiki looked Youka with astonishment. "Do I have to keep letting it grow longer? Until it's as long as a girl's?"

"Usually, you let it grow until it stops growing any longer. We'll cut it neatly for you."

"Then I can't cut it myself?"

If you want to be ugly when you transform, then we'll cut it off for you."

"Transform?"

Youka began to comb Taiki's already partially dry hair. "You are a kirin, so you can change into the outer form of a kirin."

"The outer form of a 'kirin'? Do you mean the animal?" *[note: in japanese, the word for giraffe is "kirin." for this next part, just keep in mind that while they're all saying "kirin," taiki is thinking of a giraffe, while the nyosen are all thinking of the divine beast.]*

"Yes."

Then, Taiki began to contemplate. He already knew that he was a "kirin," but he thought that it was only a name referring to people who were hatched from the fruit of the tree. However, listening to what Youka was saying, it seemed as if that wasn't the case.

"Then am I originally an animal?" This confused him. Even though it's said that humans are a kind of animal, the meaning was not quite the same.

"Yes."

"Then, the person I saw earlier, Ren Taiho, is she one too?"

"Of course."

Taiki's understanding lessened even more.

Was he going to change into a giraffe like a wolfman's transformation? A wolfman's transformation didn't seem that weird, but to turn into a giraffe, his neck would have to stretch so much, so he felt that it was definitely really weird.

--At this time, Taiki had not yet figured out what kind of creature a kirin was.

Teiei had been smiling and watching Taiki and the nyosen when she discovered a look of uncertainty on Taiki's face and suddenly came to a realization.

"Oh, it's because you haven't transformed before, so you don't understand. The hair on your head is not the same as ours. You have a mane."

Taiki nodded. Giraffes definitely had a sort of mane.

Teiei motioned for Taiki to move to in front of her and gently touched the center of his forehead, near his hairline. At this time, Taiki suddenly felt a rush of strong discomfort and anxiety.

"You have a small bump right here."

When he heard Teiei say this, Taiki lifted his hand up and rubbed his forehead. There definitely was a little bump.

"This is a kirin's horn. This horn is extremely important to the kirin. Just then, when I touched your forehead, you should have felt very uncomfortable, right?"

"...A little bit."

"You don't need to be embarrassed about it. A kirin does not like it at all when someone touches their horn. When you get a little older, you'll hate it even more. You won't want to let anyone touch it, not even Sanshi."

After hearing Teiei say these things, Taiki remembered that he had never liked it when someone touched his forehead. Even if it had been his mother, he had still felt like running away.

"Then I'm really a kirin, huh."

"Of course."

From the side, Youka anxiously said, "Just wait until you've transformed. Then you'll understand what we mean."

"How do I transform?"

At this question from Taiki, Youka tilted her head and thought for a little bit. "Yeah... If you had been born and raised on Mt. Hou, then you would inherently know. Because those who are born here remain in kirin form for the first part of their lives. But you were born in Hourai, so you've been in human form..."

Youka wasn't very clear on matters concerning Hourai, but because there had been kirin before who had come back from Hourai, she had heard a few things.

"Does changing into a kirin feel uncomfortable?"

"There are no kirin who dislike transforming, so I don't think it's uncomfortable."

"Don't you think it's really weird?"

"Not at all." After Youka said this, she started to comb Taiki's hair with her fingers again. "You aren't like most kirin. Most kirin have manes are gold, like Ren Taiho's. You are a kokki, which I've heard are very rare! You need to hurry and let me see you after your transformation! The color of your mane is so pretty, you'll definitely look even better after you've turned into a kirin."

"But I can't think of a way to transform."

"I think..." Youka sighed. "I can't think of a way either. After all, I'm not a kirin, and I've never transformed. If we get a chance, we'll ask Genkun!"

"Okay..."

Teiei looked at Taiki, who was not yet completely at ease, and could not help but silently crease her brow. Having lived in the other world for ten long years, would Taiki actually be able to transform without any problems? Though it's said that there has never been a kirin who was not able to transform, if Taiki were to be the first to set the precedent, it would be too unfortunate.

Gyokuyou may have an answer to this question, but she wasn't someone one could find just by wanting to find her. However, Taiki was running out of time!

Teiei's line of sight moved away from Taiki and Youka, who were joking with each other, as she looked up anxiously at the already darkening sky.

Luckily, the spring equinox had already passed, but when the summer solstice arrived, there would definitely be people climbing the mountain.

Is a kirin who cannot transform able to choose a ruler?

## CHAPTER FOUR

1

Taiki absent-mindedly wandered around the small paths, not looking at where he was going at all. In addition, Taiki was still essentially unfamiliar with the roads outside of Rosen Palace. However, since Sanshi was with him, he didn't worry about getting lost.

He was walking aimlessly like this for a while when he suddenly saw a gate in front of him, obstructing the path. The door was shut tightly, preventing Taiki from going any further.

This was the outer perimeter of Houro Palace. It probably took him a while to walk here from Rosen Palace, which meant that he had already been lost in thought for a long time.

"..." Taiki sighed. The bolt for the gate was on this side, so it would have been easy to open the gate, had he wanted to. However, the nyosen had told him before that he absolutely could not take one step out of this gate.

But Taiki didn't feel like heading back, so he turned around and raised his arms toward Sanshi, who had been quietly following him.

"Sanshi, can you take me up there?"

Sanshi nodded her head and picked Taiki up. At Taiki's current age, it wouldn't be easy for most women to lift him, but ever since he returned to Mt. Hou, he was no longer as heavy as he looked on the outside. Since he now had an immortal body, he was extremely light, so Sanshi didn't expend the slightest amount of energy to pick him up. Only two or three jumps and she arrived at the top of a cliff.

Looking down from the top, Houro Palace looked like a maze. The roofs of the palace structures that were scattered everywhere reflected a greenish light. At the edge of the maze there stood a snow-white tree, which at that moment was bathed in sunlight.

Taiki held on to Sanshi as he stared in the direction of the tree.

Gazing at it from above, Houro Palace appeared to be in the shape of a fan. The Shashinboku was situated beside a cliff wall on the terrace furthest east, which was also the eastern boundary of the palace. The top of the enormous, strangely-shaped crag could not be seen, and the bottom extended into a gorge of an unknown depth. Most people could not walk its complex, intertwining terrain.

On the inner side of the terrace, there was a gradual slope, the area of which was wider the closer it got. At some point, it diverged into a countless number of small paths, and at another point it converged into one path. This path was cut off firmly by the gate that Taiki had just seen at the end of the maze.

A steep mountain peak stood on the northern side of the maze. The cliff wall of the steep mountain, as well as the soaring peak that extended past the clouds included no easy way to climb, even for Sanshi.

The eastern and northern sides were protected by towering cliff walls, so those who wanted to visit Houro Palace must first enter through that gate, and then walk the correct route through the maze in order to reach their destination.

Taiki left Sanshi's embrace and, standing on the crag, he looked back behind him.

On the southern and eastern sides outside of the maze of the palace, the confusing terrain continued.

The inside and outside of the maze formed a single gigantic labyrinth. Even with Taiki looking at it from above, he wasn't clear where the border between the two actually was.

However, the terrain on the outside did look slightly simpler than that of the inside. The small paths were wider and the open areas were much bigger. If someone walking in the middle of it mastered the direction of the sun, they should be able to reach Houro Palace.

Taiki was thinking these things as he looked around, when he saw an emerald green glimmer coming from somewhere a far distance down the mountain.

"Sanshi, what's over there?" Taiki asked as he pointed. Sanshi looked in that direction with her round eyes.

"Hoto Palace..."

"There are palaces outside of the gate?"

Sanshi nodded. "Outer palaces."

"Oh..."

In this way, Taiki was looking at the maze, when a strong gust of wind blew at them. He looked around and saw no oceans around, but the wind had carried with it the smell of the sea.

"What's wrong?" Sanshi couldn't help but ask, seeing Taiki stare into the distance as he stood in the wind. Sanshi did not speak up to ask him questions very often, so that meant that he appeared to be completely lost in thought.

"Sanshi, did you have to transform in order to look like you do now? Or were you born this way?"

Sanshi gently stroked his head. "Nyokai cannot transform. Transformation requires a special power in order to perform."

"Oh..."

"Changing your outward appearance is not a very easy thing to do. There are youma that are capable of it, but their magical powers are extremely strong. Even monarchs may not be able to control them."

"Youma?"

"They are creatures that possess supernatural powers and do not listen to the will of the heavens."

"Are nyokai also youma?"

Sanshi shook her head. "Nyokai are creatures that are between humans and youju, called nin'you or youjin. The

special ones born on Mt. Hou are called nyokai."

"Then... are kirin considered youju?"

Sanshi revealed to Taiki an expression that no one else had ever had a chance to see. "Kirin definitely possess powers, but we don't call kirin by the name youju. Kirin are shinju, divine beasts."

"Why?"

"Because in this world, only gods and monarchs are nobler than the kirin. More particularly, only the Taiou, Lady Seioubo and Tentei hold a higher status than you."

"I...don't quite understand."

Sanshi brushed his hair. "Then just remember that since Seioubo and Tentei don't usually come down from the Heavens, you will probably never have a chance to meet them. Thus, the only one who is nobler than you is the Taiou."

"Then what about everyone else? Doesn't Lady Gyokuyou have a higher status than me?"

"If you can call her by the name Gyokuyou, that means that you and she share the same status. It is only etiquette that requires you address her as Lady."

"This is so complicated."

"Is it very complicated?"

"Yes." Taiki lowered his head to look at the scenery below his feet. After standing in the wind for a moment, he asked Sanshi another question.

"What do I need to do...to be able to transform?"

Sanshi looked at the depressed expression on Taiki's face. "That is an ability that you were born with... When the time comes, you will do it naturally."

"Really...?" Taiki lowered his eyelids. Recently, a lot of the nyosen had told him to quickly transform into a black kirin so that they could experience something new. Taiki knew that the nyosen all adored him, so that he could satisfy their hopes. However, he had no idea as to how he would do it.

"You don't need to worry... you just need to live your days with happiness."

"Okay..." Taiki leaned his head on Sanshi's wrist.

It was at this moment that he spotted two figures on a small path in the vicinity of Hoto Palace.

"Sanshi, there are people over there."

Sanshi looked over toward Hoto Palace and nodded her head. "It's probably a couple nyosen who've gone to burn some incense. They're bringing flowers and sticks of incense to the altar in Hoto Palace."

"Sanshi, let's return with the nyosen."

Taiki had no way to get himself down to the path from the top of the crag, so he prepared himself for Sanshi to carry him down. At this time, Sanshi suddenly jerked her head fiercely.

"What's wrong?"

In the second that it took Taiki to ask this question, Sanshi's outline looked like it had been sucked into a little crack and disappeared.

"Sanshi?"

"Stay where you are and don't move."

He only heard Sanshi's voice--her voice came from beside him, full of a tense feeling, but he couldn't see her.

Taiki stood on the crag. Hearing such a nervous tone, as well as an unimaginably monstrous ferocity develop in her voice, he guessed that something was definitely out of the ordinary.

Taiki carefully looked around, not daring to breathe too loudly. He grabbed onto the cliffside, and stretched his neck out to see if he could find Sanshi's figure. At this time something suddenly brushed past his neck.

"Huh...?"

He felt something fly towards him and graze his cheek. And then, something else wrapped itself around his hands, with which he had been holding on to the cliffside. Suddenly, his hands were tugged by a strong force and it flung his body over the side of the rock face.

In that second, Taiki saw that his hands were bound by a long chain.

He began to fall.

--Someone was pulling him off the crag.

2

"I've got you!"

Taiki was startled awake by a loud and coarse voice.

He suddenly remembered that he had fallen off of the crag and into the area beyond the boundary where the nyosen had told him never to cross. When he tried to think back to why he had fallen, he heard another deep shouting. He was laying on the ground and turned to see where the voice came from, when he saw a few droplets of blood spray thru the air.

"It looks like blood..." In the moment this thought floated into his mind, it was as if his body temperature had dropped, and he was suddenly unable to move his body.

He remembered a peculiarity that he had almost forgotten after he had arrived at Mt. Hou.

--I'm afraid of blood!

Even when it was blood from his own injury, he almost couldn't stand it. If it was someone else's blood coming out of their wound, he would get so scared that he couldn't breathe.

He tried to close his eyes, but even his eyelids wouldn't listen to his commands. It was as if he had forgotten to take a breath, and all he could feel was the urgent beating of his heart. He had almost reached his limit. The sight of the blood spray kept replaying itself deep inside his pupil, which had already lost focus.

(I was originally standing on top of the crag!)

Then something had bound his hands and dragged him down. He felt that that thing was still wrapped around his hands now, like it was a chain of thorns.

He knew that he had fallen off the crag.

He was now laying on the ground which was piled full of rocks, with his body in an unnatural position. He was on his back with stones under him.

Having fallen from such a high place into the bottom of a valley, and passing by so many sharp rocks, logic dictates that he must have been wounded. However, right now Taiki was not clear on whether or not he had been injured, or if through a miracle, he was only lightly hurt.

He could only feel the strong beating of his heart. His hands and feet were already so cold he could not move them, and he was dizzy as if he had a fever. He couldn't wipe the bright red pigment of blood away. It occupied his mind and was so vivid that there was no way for him to understand what was going on in front of him.

He wanted to shake his head forcefully so that he might wake up a little bit, however he couldn't even blink his eyes. Was his inability to move due to an injury? Or was it because he had just seen droplets of blood? What was actually going on right now?

"You monster!" He heard a coarse voice calling out, and finally understood what it was that he was looking at.

It was a man. He was a big man who was holding a sword in his hands.

And that sword was pointed at Sanshi!

"I'm not going to be beaten by a nin'you! Go the hell back to the Yellow Sea!"

He raised the sword and sliced it down quickly.

(Sanshi!)

He wanted to shout, but he couldn't make any sounds.

The edge of the blade made an arc in the air, brushing past Sanshi's body. Sanshi had reached out in an attempt to grab a hold of his throat.

The tips of her white fingers had been stained red. In the next moment, Sanshi's wrist sprayed fresh blood as the edge of the sword crossed it.

(Stop!)

He shut his eyes tightly, secretly wishing that he wouldn't have to open them again. He was already not sure if he was still breathing or if his heart was still beating.

He didn't want to open his eyes, but all of a sudden a strong force tugged at his hands, and he opened his eyes in shock. Before he was clear on what had happened, he had already rolled off the rocks.

His back was struck and just as he wanted to cry out, his wrists were being tugged again. He looked up only to see his two wrists being pulled into the air. Around his wrists was a thin chain that was connected all the way to the man's hand that wasn't holding the sword. Whenever the man moved a little, a sharp pain would occur in his shoulders and elbows as if they were being dislocated. He was dragged forward on top of a crag in this way, with the upper portion of his body rubbing against the top of the stones, causing him a piercing pain.

"Who are you?" The man was pointing his sword at Sanshi as he looked at Taiki. He looked very angry.

"Why is your hair like this?" The tone of the man's voice sounded like he was blaming him, but Taiki didn't know how he should reply.

Sanshi jumped in front of the man again. He swung the sword at her and cut her leg. Bright red spots sprayed from Sanshi's body once again.

The man glared at Taiki again and twisted his long, cruel face as he yelled at him loudly.

"Boy, you aren't a kirin?"

Kirin? Of course he was a kirin. Everyone had said so.

Could he answer him like this?

But right now, he was more worried about Sanshi!

Sanshi...

(Ah... She's bled so much...)

Whenever the man moved, Taiki's wrists would be jerked at. It was so painful, he felt like his whole body was going to be ripped apart.

"Damn it! And I thought you were a kirin. I spent all this time and I end up with a little brat and a nin'you following me!"

Sanshi lunged at the man again, but met only his sword as he swung it at her. More blood droplets splattered onto the ground. Sanshi backed up as the man moved forward a few steps, causing Taiki to be dragged along again, the sharp rocks scratching up his body.

"How did a nin'you like you get into Mt. Hou? Let me teach you a thing or two!"

He cut Sanshi again with the point of the blade, which hit the rocks.

(Sanshi...)

Sanshi's white body was already spotted with blood.  
(Sanshi, run away...)  
He really wanted to call this out, but he could not say anything...



3

"Stop this immediately!"

Suddenly hearing a loud sharp voice, Taiki opened his eyes.

"How...could this happen!?"

"Taiki!"

He heard a mass of footsteps running in his direction as pale-faced nyosen entered his line of sight.

"This...is too much! Taiki!"

When the nyosen ran over and reached out their hands, Taiki broke out in tears. Warm hands picked him up and he smelled the pleasant fragrance of a nyosen, making him feel like he could sleep forever.

"What is going on here? Sanshi, stop!"

"Is she your pet dog? Quickly, take her away!"

"You're the one who should go away, you horrible person!"

Hearing a loud shouting, Taiki lifted up his head.

It had been Teiei's voice. This was the first time he had seen her so agitated. The man was also looking at her with surprise, while Sanshi hatefully glowered at the man.

"Sanshi, that's enough. If you bleed any more you won't be able to be by Taiki's side. If you don't want that to happen, then you should cool down a little bit."

After saying this to Sanshi, Teiei glared at the man.

"How dare you come to Mt. Hou and treat Taiki in this vulgar manner!"

"Taiki?" The man looked at the child who was being tightly embraced by a nyosen.

"You're saying that this brat... no, this child is Taiki?"

"Correct! Since ancient times, the only children that appear on Mt. Hou are the Mt. Hou Kou. And you perform these treacherous actions upon Mt. Hou Kou! I would like to hear an explanation now."

An expression of joy piled upon the man's entire face.

"Taiki! I can't believe I caught him." After saying this, he strode forward a step.

Teiei extended her hand to block him. "What is your answer? You are not to get one step closer to Mt. Hou Kou! I want to hear your explanation first."

"I've caught Taiki! It was me!"

"You still won't answer me? Is it possible that you want to experience the power of the nyosen?"

The man had a hateful grin upon his face. "I am the Shikou Daibu of the Bakou in Tai Kingdom. I am called Goson. I heard that the kirin had returned to Mt. Hou, so I came."

"Hoto Palace has not permitted anyone by the name of Goson to climb the mountain."

"Ah... Regarding this, I am very sorry. I was too eager to see Houro Palace, and consequently, I did not go to Hoto Palace beforehand to tell them. However, I've caught the kirin!"

"You've caught him? What do you mean by 'caught him'?"

The man widened his eyes. "I've caught the kirin. Though my hasty rush up the mountain is my mistake, for which I apologize, but I hope that you can grant Taiki to me."



After saying this, the man laughed. "I am the King of Tai!"

Taiki felt the body of the nyosen who was embracing him begin to shake with anger. And as if it had been contagious, Teiei's shoulders also started to shake a little.

"You ignorant fool!"

Hearing Teiei's angry yell, the man couldn't help but take a half-step back.

"Who would have thought that the Bakou of Tai Kingdom would actually have allowed such a foolish person to become the Shikou Daibu!"

The man retreated another half-step backward.

"What did you think Taiki was? Did you think that the honorable Mt. Hou Kou was the same as the youju that you catch in the Yellow Sea? Don't kid yourself! You, the King of Tai? I advise you to get off this mountain before lightning strikes you as a punishment from the Heavens!"

"But..."

"Be quiet! If more nonsense comes out of your mouth, even if the Heavens don't punish you, I will tear you into pieces!"

The man could no longer speak, his mouth simply opening and closing.

The nyosen who was holding Taiki stood up and carefully helped Taiki remove the chain on his wrists.

She gently rubbed the skin where the chain had bound Taiki's wrists, and then she stroked his cheek and brushed his hair. Then she spoke to Taiki, who was near tears again.

"This makes me so angry. You must have been so scared! I am going to take you back to the palace now."

"But Sanshi..." He looked at Sanshi, who was standing quietly to one side. The nyosen shook her head.

"Not yet. Don't worry about her right now."

Though he still wasn't clear on what had happened, he did know that Sanshi was injured for the sake of protecting him.

He wanted to know if her wounds were serious and to thank her and treat her wounds, but just looking at her with blood all over her body, made his heart feel like it was being squeezed. Since Sanshi's body gave off a strong smell of blood, no matter what, he would not be able to be close to her.

He carried a mood that was hard to get over as he let the nyosen pick him up. His whole body ached, and as a result, he really wanted to cry before the nyosen had even walked one step.

After they entered the big gate, he saw Youka.

All the nyosen who ran over to him saw Taiki's appearance and cried out. The nyosen who was carrying him explained what had happened to them, and after they heard, they rushed outside.

"Really...this is too much!" said Youka, as she stared angrily out the gate. Then she anxiously reached her hands to Taiki.

"This is really unfortunate. You must have been so scared. Are you all right?"

"Sanshi..."

Youka nodded her head in understanding.

"Sanshi's fine. Although a nyokai's wounds might look very serious, they will heal very quickly. But did you get hurt?"

"I don't know."

"At any rate, we should return to the palace first. Sanshi will clean her body before she comes back, so you don't need to worry."

Taiki finally nodded his head.

"You don't need to be so sad. There was nothing you could do. Kirin have always been creatures that feared blood. Even to the point that some kirin will get sick when they just smell blood!"

"Really...? The other kirin are like this too?"

"Yes, so you don't need to feel so ashamed. After Sanshi comes back, I'll help treat her wounds."

"Okay..."

Taiki reached his hand out to Youka, and Youka picked him up.

Afterwards, all the nyosen who had come rushing argued about who would carry him back, all along the road to Rosen Palace.

4

After they got back to his bedroom at Rosen Palace, Youka brought a big basin of medicinal water and let Taiki soak in it.

She carefully checked Taiki's body for injuries and then delicately washed his body as she listened to him tell her about what had happened to him. She listened and silently cursed the foolish man several times.

"Do you know what was actually going on?" Taiki still didn't quite understand the cause of the occurrence.

Youka smiled at the puzzled and anxious Taiki. "It was because I was too careless, thinking that since the spring equinox had passed, everything would be fine... Please forgive me for my mistake."

"You didn't make a mistake."

"No, I should have been more clear with you. Luckily, you didn't get any serious injuries. When you fell off the crag,

I'm certain it was Sanshi that caught you. After she comes back, you need to properly show her your appreciation."

"Yes..."

"Also, please promise me that you will never, even if Sanshi is with you, cross the big gate of Houro Palace without a nyosen accompanying you. No, please promise me not even to get near to the big gate."

"I won't go out there."

Hearing Taiki say this, Youka nodded her head. And then after Taiki got out of the bath, she wrapped him up with the towel in her hand.

Youka carried Taiki to his bed and lightly wiped his body clean.

"...The kirin will choose a ruler."

"How is the ruler chosen? Shouldn't the child of the king succeed him?"

"No, the kirin chooses him."

"I don't understand..."

"Actually, I'm not too clear on it either. After all, I'm not a kirin. But it's probably like this: the ruler is decided by Tentei, who holds the highest status in the Heavens. After he compares the natures of many people, he chooses the person who most fit to be the ruler."

"Oh..."

"And then Tentei will inform the kirin of his choice... Oh, he doesn't just use his mouth to tell the kirin! It's just that when the kirin meets the person who should become the ruler, he will know naturally that it is him, because the kirin will receive a revelation."

"What's a revelation?"

"That's something only a kirin knows. If you are a kirin, it is certain that you will be able to feel the revelation. Regardless of how small the kirin is, they can definitely all choose a ruler."

"...Okay."

"After a little while, those who hope to become the ruler will climb Mt. Hou in droves. That is how they will be able to meet you, so that you can choose a ruler out of them."

"Just like...that guy today?"

Youka nodded. She put down the cloth she had been using to dry Taiki's hair and began to help him put on his undergarments.

"Yes. A lot of people will come! Then... It'll probably be around the summer solstice."

"Why the summer solstice?"

"Because Mt. Hou is located in the center of the Yellow Sea. Ordinarily, people aren't allowed into the Yellow Sea. However, there are four gates upon the periphery of the Yellow Sea. Once they go through those gates, they will have entered the Yellow Sea. Also, the four gates will open alternately at the spring and fall equinoxes and the summer and winter solstices."

The day the gate opens is called Ankou Day. Outside of Ankou Day, these four gates are so closely protected that not even a drop of water can get through.

"They only open for one day?"

"Right, from noon on the day of, to noon on the day after. The spring equinox occurred not long after you had just arrived, and I thought that even if those people had wanted to climb the mountain, they probably wouldn't have had enough time. I didn't think it could happen, so I lowered my guard. Please forgive my error."

"That's okay."

"That man today probably rushed here to make it in time. However, when the summer solstice arrives, then there really will be many people coming to climb the mountain."

"Oh..."

"To get from any of the four gates to here, no matter how fast they are, it takes half a month. Thus, once they enter a gate, they aren't able to leave until the next time a gate opens. Also, those who wish to climb Mt. Hou will set up camp in the area around Hoto Palace, and they will stay there until the day they can leave. Although there are many youma and youju in the Yellow Sea, they aren't able to enter Mt. Hou, so staying there is very safe. When the time comes, there will be so many people that the commotion will seem like a small town!"

"That many people? Then will I really know who the ruler is?"

"You don't need to worry. You will gain a revelation, so you will certainly know. Regardless of how great a person looks, if you don't receive the revelation, then they aren't the ruler."

"Okay..."

"However, among those, there will still be people like that idiot today, who think that they just need to use their savage strength to capture the kirin or force the kirin to bow down to them in order to make them king."

"So is that why Houro Palace was built at the end of a maze?"

"Probably. Because when some people hear that a kirin has been born, they will want to come and take the kirin."

"Oh..."

"When you are allowed outside of the gate, naturally we will take you outside, so until that time, you must not run out there by yourself. Even when you are inside the gates, you still need to be careful."

"I know."

Youka smiled and rubbed Taiki's head. "When the kirin receives the revelation, he will bow in front of the ruler. Besides the ruler, the kirin will absolutely not bow down to anyone else. Even in the shrines of Tentei and Seioubo,

only kirin are allowed to not bow down in respect."

"Wow..."

"And then the kirin will vow never to abandon the ruler, never to disobey his royal command, and pledge his loyalty to the ruler."

"Okay."

"After the ruler vocally agrees, the kirin will press his forehead, or I should say his horn, against the feet of the ruler. Thereupon, that person formally becomes the ruler. The person you choose will be called Taiou, which is what the ruler of Tai Kingdom is called. And from then on, you will be called Tai Taiho."

"This is so complicated!"

Seeing Taiki's sour face, Youka laughed.

"Is it? After you choose a ruler, you will ascend to a place even higher than Mt. Hou. There sits the shrine of Seioubo, where you will take the Taiou."

"How do I take him up there? Even Sanshi can't go up there."

Youka laughed even more happily.

"At that time, a road will naturally appear. You will go up and enter the shrine to receive the Tenchoku. Afterwards, you will go down to the Kingdom of Tai. You shouldn't ask me what the Tenchoku is though, because this is something only kirin and rulers know about."

"Okay."

"When it comes time, a path of beautiful clouds will appear from Mt. Hou straight to the Kingdom of Tai, and you will ride the clouds all the way down to Tai Kingdom."

"And then?"

"And then?" Youka looked at Taiki and saw only Taiki's anxious face.

"And then what happens? Am I going to live in Tai Kingdom forever?"

"Of course."

"Then will I never see you again?" Taiki looked like he was about to cry. "What about Sanshi? And Teiei? And the rest of the nyosen?"

"Well," Youka sighed. She hugged Taiki, who was sitting on the bedding. "Yes... I suppose we may never have another chance to meet. However, Sanshi will always stay by your side, forever and ever."

"Do I have to choose a ruler?"

"Choosing a ruler is your most important duty!"

Seeing Taiki hugging her tightly with his little hands, Youka gently stroked his back.

"You must become an exceptional kirin and choose a great ruler! We will all care about you from far away at Mt. Hou."

Mt. Hou was a place to bring up kirin, so once a kirin leaves Mt. Hou, on principle, they cannot come back. After all, the nyosen of Mt. Hou need to concentrate on taking care of the newly born kirin. But Taiki didn't need to know these things right now.

"Our only hope is that you can become a spectacular kirin and fulfill your duties without any problems."

Taiki nodded.

--Although, it was very forced.

5

Finally, relative to the calendar, summer was getting closer and closer.

Relative to the calendar because there were no so-called seasons on Mt. Hou.

After a page was turned, it would be the summer solstice. On that day, the Reikon Gate on the southwestern side of the Yellow Sea would open.

"Taiki, I'll brush your hair into a topknot," said Teiei to Taiki. Because she saw that as Taiki was gathering stones from the river, he would constantly be pulling his hair out of the water.

"Okay," said Taiki as he sat down on the crag next to the river. Teiei unfastened the thin rope that was at her waist and began to tie a topknot. Taiki's neatly trimmed head of steel-colored hair had already grown down to his back, but then putting it up into a topknot made it feel like it was still too short.

"Can I trim my bangs?"

"If you must trim them, we will do it for you. However, if you end up regretting it, we won't sympathize."

"This length should already be long enough, shouldn't it?"

Hearing Taiki say this with such apprehension, Teiei couldn't help but laugh.

"When you transform into a kirin, your hair won't be this long. It will become a length that is just right. It looks like your hair is still growing, so that means that it's not yet long enough."

"If only I could transform now and see if it's long enough or not."

"That's not necessary. We are all very experienced! Your topknot is finished."

Teiei squinted and watched as Taiki jumped back into the water with a plop.

"Have you heard the story of Sairin?"

"Sairin? Nope."

"A long time ago, there was a kirin who liked to look pretty, called Sairin."

"That's a woman because she has Rin in her name, right?"

"Right. Sairin was always very envious of the nyosen's hairstyle, so she would always complain that she wanted the nyosen to brush her hair into a topknot."

"And then she got a topknot with a hairpin, like you?"

Teiei nodded as she was sewing clothes. "Right. We combed her hair with pomade and tied it up into a tight topknot, and then we inserted all sorts of hairpins. Unexpectedly, when evening came and she transformed in order to get back to the palace, her mane was still bound in a topknot and there was no way for her to straighten her neck, so it became crooked."

Taiki giggled.

"That must have hurt."

"Right. So you have to be careful. If you transform with your hair in a topknot, it will hurt a lot."

"All right!"

Taiki and Teiei both laughed. Following that, Teiei lowered her head to look at the clothes beside her hand.

Ever since that incident with that Goson from Ba Province, Taiki always had at least two or three nyosen by his side. Because when the nyokai encounters urgent situations, the only thought that goes through her mind is to protect Taiki, sometimes she will injure herself needlessly and cause injury to Taiki.

Just like on that day, after Sanshi had cleaned her body once, she had still not been able to completely wash off the smell of blood. Taiki didn't tell the nyosen and let Sanshi be by him until he fell asleep like in the past. As a result, he had gotten a fever by the next day.

(It would be better if Taiki had shirei...)

Teiei quietly thought to herself.

Relying only on Sanshi to protect Taiki isn't enough.

At times like these, she felt like the ten years that Taiki had been away from Mt. Hou was really too long a time.

The Yellow Sea around the Five Mountains was a habitat for youma, and ordinarily, a kirin would use his spare time to walk along the periphery of the Yellow Sea and tame youma, turning them into his shirei. At first he would find a few smaller youma at the foot of the Five Mountains to test out his skill and tame them.

(However, Taiki's already run out of time...)

Moreover, Taiki also didn't know how to tame youma, and there was no way Teiei could teach him, because this should have been an instinctual skill that a kirin was born with.

(If only he had come back five years earlier.)

Kirin are born in beast form and in their first five years, do not change their appearance, since they don't have a horn yet. They don't know how to speak and don't quite understand everything a nyosen says, like a small bird that has just hatched.

However, newly hatched birds can't fly, but kirin already know how to gallop through the air when they are born. Small kirin can only follow their nyokai around, wandering blithely through the Five Mountains, as they search for youma and tame them for their own amusement. Small kirin grow up only drinking their nyokai's milk, so they build up a resistance to injury and blood.

Though it is a little different for every kirin, they begin to transform every now and then to human form and speak the human language after an average of about five years. After another period of time, their transformations will last longer, until one day the sharp tips of their horns will emerge from their foreheads. That is also the time it stops nursing, and from then on, they can show their complete human forms.

Thus, from the time they stop nursing, most kirin just know naturally how to transform and how to tame youma, and they don't need anyone to teach them. Though they are not considered fully grown until their horns are completely developed, they basically already possess all the skill that a kirin should have. Also, it isn't until this time that the flag can be raised.

After a kirin stops nursing, their native kingdom--although they weren't really born in that kingdom, most people refer to it as such--receives news of this event, and every shrine in the kingdom raises a Kirin Flag. This meant that there was a kirin on Mt. Hou who was already prepared to choose a ruler. After all those that hope to be the ruler see the raised flag, they then climb the mountain in throngs.

Teiei sighed.

Taiki was no longer a small kirin. On the day that he had returned to Mt. Hou, his native kingdom, Tai Kingdom had raised the Kirin Flag. There was no way to tell the people now that Taiki was not yet ready. He had to choose a ruler. At this point, Taiki should already know how to transform, and he should already have shirei.

"What's the matter?"

Taiki asked Teiei this. He may have heard Teiei sighing.

Teiei shook her head at Taiki's curious face.

It would be better if she didn't say anything. Or else it might be like the matter concerning his transformation, causing Taiki to worry to himself. After all, this was something that no one could teach him.

It wasn't easy to cheer Taiki up, and she didn't want to make him depressed and unhappy again.

Ever since Taiki had heard Youka say that after he chooses a ruler, he wouldn't be able to return to Mt. Hou, he had been in low spirits. The closer the summer solstice got, the more he moped, making the nyosen who saw him feel all anxious inside.

He was like this up until he had heard that there wasn't necessarily a real ruler among the people who will climb the

mountain during the summer solstice, and that some kirin live on Mt. Hou for several years and wait many seasons before they finally find a ruler. Then, he recovered the cheerfulness of his former days again.

"We need to think of a way to take advantage of the time we have now..."

Fortunately, there were no people at Hoto Palace right now. It seemed that the only person to make it for the Ankou Day of the spring equinox was that Goson.

Afterwards, all the nyosen had reproached Goson, and they also didn't give him any food or water before chasing him off the mountain. In order to get back to the Kingdom of Tai, he had to wait at the Reikon Gate for the next Ankou Day before the gate would open. However, setting up camp there, he had to avoid the attacks of the youma and youju, which was not an easy thing to do. Even though he would probably be able to survive, when Ankou Day arrives and the crowds enter the Reikon Gate to climb the mountain, he will definitely become a laughingstock. However, Teiei did not feel sympathy for him at all.

But the current situation could only be kept until the summer solstice. After that day passes, Hoto Palace will be filled with a multitude of people. Perhaps they could make the most of their time by taking Taiki to the Yellow Sea and letting him scuffle with the small youma, and possibly then he would be able to figure out how to tame youma. But then again, compared to most small kirin, Taiki had already lost the tenacity of an animal born in the wild, so Teiei was very afraid that something unexpected would happen that they would not be able to control.

"Teiei, do you have something on your mind?"

Hearing a voice, Teiei lifted her head and saw Taiki looking at her with concern.

"No..."

"Are you worrying about me?"

Teiei gently laughed. Taiki already knew that everything that a nyosen would be anxious about had to do with the kirin. This caused Teiei both to be happy that Taiki was smart and clever, and to adore that he was so perceptive he was able to sense what was in her heart.

"How could that be!?"

"But..."

"I've just been sewing so much that I'm feeling a little restless. I'm telling you, I don't like doing needlework at all!"

"Do you want me to help?"

"Ah! I must really thank you, but if you did sew better than me, then I would be too embarrassed. Don't worry about about and go play!"

Teiei laughed and rubbed Taiki's head, as she secretly thought, "If only we could let Taiki meet other kirin, then things would be better."

A kirin would be able to teach Taiki all the things that the nyosen and Sanshi could not.

## CHAPTER FIVE

1

"Lady Gyokuyou!" called out Taiki suddenly, just as he finished his lunch at Rosen Palace.

Rosen Palace held a total of five rooms, and Gyokuyou entered the center room with a golden-haired young man behind her. Seeing this scene, the bowing Teiei couldn't help but secretly admire Gyokuyou.

(Genkun had already thought of this.)

"It hasn't been long since the last time I saw you, but you've already grown so much."

Gyokuyou smiled as she stroked Taiki's hair.

"Your mane has grown long. Are your days here good?"

"Very good," replied Taiki to Gyokuyou, as his eyes drifted over to the young man behind her. Other than that time he encountered Goson, this was the first time he had seen a man on Mt. Hou, so he was very curious.

"This is Kei Taiho, Keiki."

Taiki's eyes widened. "Is he a kirin too?"

Gyokuyou nodded.

Taiki looked up at the expressionless Keiki, who nodded at Taiki.

Even though he looked like he was very uninterested, Taiki was still very happy to meet another kirin. After all, Taiki knew that he was a kirin, but he still wasn't sure what kind of a creature a kirin actually was.

Gyokuyou looked at the surrounding nyosen.

"Rosen Palace looks very busy."

Youka hurriedly lowered her head and replied, "I'm sorry. Since Taiki doesn't like to eat alone..."

Gyokuyou heard this and laughed.

"Very good. Taiki is the master of Mt. Hou right now, so you should listen to his instructions."

"Yes."

"Kei Taiho will stay here for a little while. You should prepare for this."

"Yes."

After watching the nyosen bow and leave, Gyokuyou took Taiki's hand.

"I heard that a boorish person intruded upon this palace. What a terrible misfortune! You didn't get injured, did you?"

"No."

"Oh, good." Gyokuyou smiled and invited Taiki and Keiki to sit. "Kei Taiho stayed upon Mt. Hou previous to you."

"Really?" Taiki looked at Keiki, but Keiki simply gave him a quick affirmative glance.

"You were both born on Mt. Hou, just like brothers. Kei Taiho will stay on Mt. Hou for a little while, so you can treat him as your older brother. Anything you don't understand, just ask him."

"Okay." Taiki smiled at Keiki. "Kei Taiho, have you eaten lunch yet?"

"Yes, I've eaten."

"Do you want to drink some tea?"

"Don't trouble yourself."

Taiki tilted his head a little bit. "Kei Taiho, which palace are you going to live in?"

"I used to live at Shiren Palace."

"Do you want to go over there now? Can I come walk with you?"

"All right."

Seeing Keiki stand up, Taiki stood up as well. As he was about to leave with Keiki, he turned to look at Gyokuyou.

"Lady Gyokuyou, are you going to stay here as well? Or do you have other things to do?"

Gyokuyou smiled. "I don't have anything to do. If you'll agree to it, I can eat dinner with you."

"Okay!"

Taiki smiled happily and then quickly chased after Keiki. Gyokuyou and the nyosen laughed as they watched him run outside. When they couldn't see their figures anymore, Teiei timidly spoke. "I would like to ask a question that may be improper..."

"You may ask it."

"I know it is impolite to say this, but Kei Taiho isn't someone who is easy to become close to. He and Taiki..."

She was not finished when Gyokuyou gave a laugh. "Kei Taiho is definitely someone who is hard to approach."

Teiei was silent. Keiki was also born on Mt. Hou and also lived there not too long ago, so Teiei very much understood him. Etiquette required that she should have denied Gyokuyou's words, but she couldn't ignore her conscience in order to say something.

"This could just be destiny. I originally wanted to ask Ren Taiho to come, but because the Kingdom of Ren was currently in turmoil, there was no way I could ask the Taiho to leave her kingdom at a time like this, not to mention that I had just asked her to help."

Renrin's native kingdom, Ren was facing internal disorder. Teiei had also heard this, so she could only nod.

"And also, I recalled that Kei Taiho was closest in age to Taiki. Though his native country has also been unstable recently, perhaps spending some time with Taiki will make him a little easier to get along with."

Hearing this, Teiei only forced a smile. "Yes."

Gyokuyou laughed lightly and suddenly smiled again. "The Queen of Kei very easily gets herself into unnecessary trouble, and Kei Taiho's personality sometimes makes it even worse for Keiou. I hope he can learn some things from Taiki's friendliness."

Teiei silently nodded in agreement.

It seems that in the places outside of Mt. Hou, the unrest never ceases.

2

Together, Taiki and several nyosen followed behind Keiki. It wasn't easy for a child like Taiki to keep up with Keiki, especially since Keiki didn't think to slow his pace down for Taiki. When the line of them arrived at Shiren Palace, Taiki was already out of breath.

Shiren Palace's layout was basically the same as that of Rosen Palace. After Keiki entered the palace, no one knew what he was pondering as he walked through and looked at every room. Taiki guessed that he was thinking fondly of the days that he had spent here before, so he stood quietly to one side.

After Keiki had gone around the palace once, he entered the center room and sat down. Taiki still said nothing.

There was furniture inside of Shiren Palace, but the curtains and decorations had all been put away. Keiki sat like this and watched the nyosen busily begin to arrange things.

Seeing that Keiki seemed like he had completely forgotten about him, Taiki began to get restless. However, Keiki's face showed a mood of contemplation, so Taiki didn't dare open his mouth to bother him. He just waited by Keiki's side, but that also felt a little bit too impolite.

When Taiki was uncertain about what he should do, he spotted a nyosen carrying in a tea set and couldn't help but let out a big sigh of relief.

"Excuse our disorder. Please have some tea," said the nyosen, as she passed over a cup of tea. "Because you haven't said anything, Taiki doesn't know what to do."

"Oh..." It seemed as if Keiki had finally remembered that Taiki was at his side and looked over at him. "Excuse me." The expressionless Keiki gave Taiki a nod, which was meant as an apology.

"Um... am I bothering you? If so, then I'll go back first." Taiki asked this very cautiously. However, before Keiki could open his mouth, a nyosen spoke for him.

"Oh, not at all. Come and drink some tea as well." The nyosen pushed a chair out for Taiki, and he sat down very hesitantly. Yet, he really felt that this situation was extremely awkward.

"Um... Might I ask where you live, Kei Taiho?"

"Kei Kingdom."

"What kind of a place is Kei Kingdom?"

"It is a kingdom in the east." Keiki's answer carried no feeling, and afterwards, he didn't say any more. Taiki still had absolutely no idea what kind of a place Kei Kingdom actually was.

"Did you used to live on Mt. Hou too?"

"Yes."

"Did you live here from the time you were born? I just got here not too long ago."

"I lived here from the time I was born."

"Then, for how long did you stay here?"

"I left two years ago."

"Then did you choose a ruler two years ago?"

"I didn't encounter my ruler until last year."

"Oooh..." said Taiki. "So you left the mountain two years ago to go find your ruler."

"Right."

"Might I ask..." Taiki lowered his head and looked at his flower-scented tea. "What is choosing a ruler like? Youka said that we receive a revelation, but I don't quite understand..."

However, Keiki's simple answer approached indifference. "When the time comes, you will understand."

"Will I also be able to choose a ruler for sure?"

"Yes, you can as long as you are a kirin."

"Even if I don't know what a revelation is?"

"It is hard to describe a revelation in words. When you meet your ruler, you will understand."

"What if I choose the wrong person, or pass by him and not know it?"

"That is not possible, because the ruler will have ouki."

"Ouki?"

Keiki nodded with no expression showing on his face. "It is the will that the ruler emanates, or you could also call it an air. At any rate, they are not like most people, so there is no way you can make a mistake."

"But I don't think I'm like most kirin. Does that matter? Could it be that the way I choose a ruler is different from other kirin?"

"I don't know much about black kirin, so I can't answer that."

"Oh..."

Taiki was at a loss for what should do now. Beads of sweat seeped out of his forehead.

Before, he had really wanted to meet another kirin, but now that he had one in front of him, why were none of his many doubts eased even a little bit?

"When you left Mt. Hou, how did you find your ruler?"

If he was asked to pick a ruler out of a group of people it might be easier, but to not know where they were, that must be extraordinarily difficult.

"I relied on the ouki to find her."

"Did you meet with a lot of people, and then checked to see if they had the ouki?"

"Even if the ruler was not right in front of me, I can still feel their ouki, so all I had to do was look in that direction."

"So it's like that..." Actually, Taiki still didn't quite understand what he meant. "You can transform, right?"

"There are no kirin who cannot transform."

"But I can't. I don't know how to transform..."

Keiki looked at Taiki, and Taiki realized that his eyes were bright purple.

"In the beginning, did anyone teach you how to raise your hand? Did anyone teach you how to walk?"

"No."

"It is the same principle. You ask me how to transform, but I have no way of telling you. Even if I did explain it to you, you wouldn't necessarily understand."

"Oh..."

Taiki lowered his head. According to that, perhaps he would never be able to transform.

A deep silence followed. Taiki felt that Keiki had already decided not to say any more, thereupon he stood up and suddenly felt like returning to Sanshi's side.

"Please excuse me for bothering you."

He took a bow towards Keiki, and Keiki silently nodded his head.

"Will I see you again at dinnertime?"

"I believe Lady Gyokuyou said that we would eat together."

"Okay... I'm sorry I asked so many questions."

"Don't be."

Taiki took another bow and then turned to leave. He walked briskly out of the palace, but before he could get to the entrance at the top of the stone steps that lead to the gate, he began to cry. He felt so discouraged and dejected, but he suddenly stopped walking, because he had heard a nyosen calling for him from behind.

"Taiki..."

A nyosen gently put her hand on his shoulder. The warmth and weight of her palms made Taiki feel even worse.

"Maybe I'm not a kirin."

"Nonsense."

The soft hand pulled Taiki into an embrace.

"If I am really a kirin, then I must be a really stupid one."

"That can't be, Taiki."

"I'm sure of it." Taiki pressed into the nyosen. "I'm sorry..."

He felt very apologetic for being a stupid kirin, for only being able to receive all the good things the nyosen offer him, and for not being able to repay them at all.

3

"How could a child like you have been born?" His grandmother always said this about him.

"Don't worry. You don't need to be sad," his mother would always tell him as she lightly stroked his hair. His mother's hands were just like those of the nyosen, all very warm.

"Don't listen to what your granny said. You just have to be a kind child like you are now and everything will be fine. As long as you are like that, your mommy will be very happy." Then why did his mother always secretly cry?

Every time he apologized to his mother, she would always tell him not to feel at fault. She would look at him while she held back tears and smiled, lightly stroking his head.

"You don't have to worry."

A nyosen had said this to him too, as they gently patted his back. And then she would use her warm hand to hold his while they returned to Rosen Palace. Youka and Teiei comforted him in the same way.

"You don't need to be impatient."

"Exactly. It doesn't matter if you can transform or not. You are most definitely a kirin! So, you don't have to worry one bit."

(You don't need to worry.)

"That Kei Taiho, he doesn't know how to behave."

(Granny's temper has always been bad.)

"Please don't cry. It doesn't matter even if you can't transform!"

(You don't need to feel guilty.)

"That's right, you don't need to worry yourself over such a small matter."

Even Sanshi had come to comfort him, gently patting him. She picked him up with the hand that she had been patting him with, and looked at his face.

"Why don't we go outside for a stroll? The evening wind is very comfortable."

Everyone was treating him so nicely that it made it even harder for him to bear. Their warm hands and tender words only made him feel even worse.

"Then you should take a walk." Youka draped a robe over him. "Come back before dinner! Today, Genkun will also be eating with you, so it'll be very exciting."

Youka sent them off. However, even though Sanshi had carried him outside, he kept crying.

"Really, Kei Taiho," sighed Gyokuyou who had gone to Shiren Palace. Keiki silently stood at one side.

"Taiki is still so small. How could you make him cry!?"

"Please don't say it like I was bullying him. That was not my intention."

"Of course, I know this...but you could have said things more tactfully."

"I was only speaking the truth. He asked me how to transform, and there really is no way I can teach him."

Gyokuyou sighed again. "To say it like that is too cold. Taiki's fortunes are not good. He grew up in Hourai, so he's not like you. You should have..."

"Because of that, you should have asked En Taiho to come, since he was also born in Hourai. I don't think I am qualified for this."

"Keiki..." Gyokuyou spoke slowly in a voice full of dignity. "I asked you to come today, because I felt that in doing so, both you and Taiki would benefit."

"I--"

"Don't you think that I, Gyokuyou, would know your troubles?"

After hearing Gyokuyou say this, Keiki could only give a heavy sigh. He thought of the ruler of his native kingdom.

Keiki's master grew up as the daughter of a common merchant family. To speak well of her, she was a slender woman; to speak badly, her spirit was weak. She did not have the determination to be the ruler of a kingdom. Everyday she would only get more and more depressed. She neglected the affairs of the kingdom and hid deep inside the royal palace, never coming out. No matter how Keiki encouraged or reproached her, no good came out of it. On the contrary, she became increasingly distant.

"Everything you say is accurate, but you have to understand, the accurate method is not necessarily always the best method!"

Keiki was baffled. He didn't understand why something that was clearly accurate was not the absolute best.

"You should first learn how to discern other people's moods. Taiki is a child who likes to interact with other people, and even he is afraid to approach you. Then how do you suppose Keiou could confide in you!?"



Keiki sighed again.

"Where did Taiki go?" asked Keiki to a nyosen he encountered as he was walking on a path. She pointed behind her, towards the perimeter of Houro Palace.

"He went to the daylily garden. Don't go teasing Taiki again!"

Along the way, every time he inquired about Taiki, he was reprimanded, making him feel very discouraged.

"I never meant to tease him."

"Even if you didn't mean to, you were still too cold to him."

"I will pay more attention to what I say."

That was all he could reply with.

He walked gloomily along the path between the rocks as he continuously encountered the nyosen on the way who either scolded him or otherwise expressed their disapproval. It wasn't easy to reach the small garden that was bursting with daylilies.

Keiki stopped. In the middle of an area occupied with yellow flowers in full bloom, he saw a nyokai sitting with bent legs on the ground. Taiki was laying face down upon the nyokai's leopard portion.

Taiki really was a strange kirin, he thought.

He was certainly a kirin, but since the color of his mane was different from the other kirin, his appearance gave Keiki a strange feeling.

There was another reason that made Keiki feel unusual, and that was that he was not used to interacting with small children. Their small bodies and slender limbs made Keiki feel like they were a different kind of creature. Taiki's huddled figure, which made him look even smaller, especially caused Keiki to feel uneasy throughout his whole body.

He hesitated, wondering if he should speak, when just then, the nyokai noticed him. Taiki followed his nyokai's line of sight and saw Keiki. His dark eyes widened and he hurriedly wiped his face with his sleeve. Then, he stood up and took a deep bow towards Keiki.

"I'm really sorry about what happened just then."

"Don't be," said Keiki, and then quickly added, "I should be the one apologizing to you. My manner towards you was too cold."

"Oh, it wasn't." Taiki shook his head. Keiki saw this and couldn't help but think how incredible it was. How could a neck so thin hold up his head?

"It's because I'm worthless. I'm really very sorry."

"No... May I sit next to you?"

"Please, sit."

After Keiki sat down, Taiki did the same. Keiki watched as Sanshi lowered her body in respect to him.

"Is she your nyokai?"

"Yes, her name is Sanshi."

"She looks like a very good nin'you."

Hearing Keiki say this, Taiki blinked his eyes.

"Are there nyokai who aren't good?"

"There are. The more forms of beasts that are mixed, like Sanshi, the better the nyokai. Sanshi, you may leave. I will accompany Taiki."

Hearing Keiki say this, Sanshi bowed deeply towards him and walked towards the path.

Keiki watched Sanshi's leaving figure and creased his brow.

"She is a good nin'you, but her powers have not yet been released."

After Taiki heard this, he tilted his head as if he didn't understand, and his mane touched the daylilies, causing them to gently sway.

"It should be because you have not displayed your full power. The nyokai and her master are very closely connected. If the kirin gets sick, the nyokai will also be unhealthy."

"Then...am I sick?"

"This was only an analogy. However...perhaps your condition could also be considered an illness."

"Really..."

Seeing the child in front of him hang his head in hopelessness, Keiki sighed heavily. He was really helpless in these situations.

4

Keiki spent a little bit of time figuring out what to say. Taiki had lowered his head in silence.

"May I ask you why you cried a moment ago?" This question may have been too blunt, but Gyokuyou had told him that he had to comprehend Taiki's mood.

"I'm sorry..." The small kirin contracted his body.

"I didn't want you to apologize. I just wanted to know the reason."

Taiki lowered his head further. "Because I feel like I'm so worthless."

"Why?"

"Because I feel like I'll never be able to learn how to transform, but the nyosen are all expecting me to..."

"Do you care that much about the nyosen's feelings?"

Hearing Keiki ask this, Taiki lifted his head with an painful look on his face.

"Yes, because everyone treats me so well. My being able to live on Mt. Hou, and my receiving everybody's extremely thoughtful care, is all because of the fact that I'm a kirin, but I can't do any of the things a kirin should be able to do. To show everyone my appreciation, I hope that I can at least transform for them to make them happy, but when I think that maybe that day will never come, I feel so useless..."

As he was saying this, Taiki's eyes began to fill with tears.

"Please don't cry, or else the nyosen will scold me again."

Taiki heard this and blinked his eyes.

"Kei Taiho, you get scolded by the nyosen too?"

"Of course I do. The nyosen do not hold back when it comes to kirin."

After Taiki heard this, he finally smiled a little bit.

"You do not need to mind the nyosen so much. They are here to take care of you. You are their master."

"But..." Taiki lowered his head again and spoke haltingly with a quiet voice, "Without the nyosen by my side, I can't do anything. I have to rely on them for everything, so it's so hard to think of myself as their master."

"Your way of thinking is very strange."

"Really...?"

Taiki's voice sounded once more like it was full of sadness, causing Keiki to panic again. In his mind, he couldn't help but think that he clearly wasn't suited to play this part, just like he had told Gyokuyou. He didn't know what she had been thinking when she asked him to come.

"Ah, I was not criticizing you."

"Yes..." Taiki nodded his head, and said in a small voice, "It's like this at home too."

"At home?"

"Yes, at my home in Hourai. I could never win the love of my granny or my mom. I always made mistakes and granny would get mad, and my mom and dad would always sigh."

The occurrence of the shoku that swept Taiki to Hourai was still clear in Keiki's memory. He had still been on Mt. Hou at that time.

"And then, Sanshi came to get me and I arrived at Mt. Hou. The nyosen all told me that my real home was Houro Palace, and then I suddenly understood. Because I was not originally my parents' real child, so nothing I did was ever right. But...it's the same at Houro Palace. Though no one lectures me or cries because of me, I still have no way of making everybody happy. I often think that perhaps I'm not a real kirin. If I'm not, then I'm not supposed to be staying at Houro Palace, just like I wasn't supposed to be at my other home."

Keiki finally understood. Taiki had left a place he had lived in for ten years before coming to Mt. Hou. Keiki thought that it was just like the bit of sadness he had felt before, when he had to leave Mt. Hou. Not to mention that the small child in front of him was someone who cried and became discouraged very easily!

"You are a kirin. This fact, you need not doubt."

"Really?"

"A kirin can recognize other kirin. You definitely emanate the spirit of a kirin."

Taiki looked up at Keiki.

"It is something like a golden radiance. I can see it very clearly, so I'm sure that I am not wrong."

Taiki heard this and looked at himself, and then he looked around Keiki.

"But I...can't see it."

"That's probably because your powers have not yet been completely released. At any rate, it is absolutely certain that you are a kirin."

"Then...can I stay on Mt. Hou? Even though I can't do any of the things a kirin should do?"

"Yes."

Taiki let out a sigh of relief and then blinked his eyes again.

"Could it be...that you miss your home in Hourai?"

"Yes, I think about it often, but then I feel guilty toward the nyosen again."

"I don't have a mother, so I don't understand... Do you miss her?"

Keiou missed her late mother very much and often thought of her home. So much so that sometimes she would yell at Keiki and demanded that he let her return to the life she once had.

"You don't have a mother?"

"Most kirin do not."

"Then I guess I'm lucky."

"But we have our nyokai and nyosen... However, you have a mother. Do you very much hope to see her again?"

Taiki didn't say anything. He just nodded his head vigorously.

"You don't need to feel ashamed toward the nyosen."

Hearing Keiki say this, Taiki lightly nodded his head.

"But I'm not that family's child, so there's no use in thinking about my mother."

"I see."

"The nyosen are so good to me. If I keep thinking of home, there will definitely be a punishment."

"There won't."

"Really?"

"Of course."

Taiki began to sob quietly. He hugged his knees and buried his face between his legs. At this, Keiki panicked and wondered if this counted as him making Taiki cry.

"Ah... Taiki...?"

"I'm sorry..." After Taiki said this, he shrunk his body even smaller. Keiki was at a complete loss as to what to do. Taiki's steel-colored hair hung down, revealing his thin neck, making him look that much more helpless, as did his shoulders, which were wrapped around his knees. Keiki hesitated a little and then attempted to put his hand upon Taiki's shoulder.

"I'm sorry..." apologized Taiki again, which confused Keiki.

"You do not have to apologize."

Hearing Keiki say this, Taiki began to bawl. Keiki emulated the nyosen and pulled Taiki into an embrace, and Taiki also hugged him tightly. Seeing Taiki so sad, of course Keiki empathized with him, but it was Taiki's warmth that caused Keiki to feel fondness for him. He lightly stroked Taiki's head and Taiki hugged him even more tightly, saying between sobs, "I...really want to go home..."

"I understand."

"I miss my mom..."

Hearing Taiki say this, Keiki felt very deeply that this little kirin was very lonely.

5

The sky had already become an orange-red color. The rays of the setting sun reflected off the sea of clouds and created an incredible glowing.

Keiki held Taiki's hand as they went through the paths of the maze, which were filled with the lights and shadows of the setting sun. As Taiki walked, he thought of his hometown.

He had played throughout the maze everyday, spending his days very happily and very quickly getting used to not having to go to school. Also, he had never had any friends that were his age, so even though he was the only child on Mt. Hou, he had never felt particularly lonely.

Sanshi and the nyosen treated him very nicely. Here, there was no grandmother to yell at him, nor did he ever see his mother argue with his grandmother because of him. And of course, he never saw his mother secretly crying after an argument. He would also never again see his mother fighting at night with his father over him, and then having his father call him out to the front and sigh in disappointment as he lectured him.

The nyosen had told him that Mt. Hou was his real home, and he never once doubted this statement. The nyosen took care of him meticulously, welcoming him from the bottom of their hearts, which contained all of him. Taiki knew that they had really been very happy with his return to Mt. Hou.

And thus, he felt that he shouldn't be longing for a place in which he didn't belong, and that that wasn't fair to the nyosen.

However, those thoughts still frequently flashed into his mind.

Thinking back now, the long hallway in his old house seemed more interesting than this maze; the yard seemed more beautiful than any of the small gardens at the palace. Compared to being surrounded by nyosen, his days at school where no one paid him any attention and where he just stared blankly at other people playing seemed happier. In the end, his impressions of his mother, father and brother were even better than Sanshi and the nyosen.

It was probably dinnertime there. Was his mother sitting with his grandmother and brother around the table? When would his father get home today? Would he return a little earlier and let him help him wash his back as they bathed together?

When he recalled these things, he would always remember them that much more fondly.

Have the hydrangeas in the backyard bloomed yet? Has grandma taken the parasol out of the storehouse and used it yet? After mom and grandma argue, will one person still hide in the bathroom? Can his brother go to the bathroom in the middle of the night by himself yet?

Do they occasionally think of him?

How sad would it be if they did already forget about him! What if they didn't forget about him, but were very happy that he had disappeared? That would be even sadder. However, if everyone still thought about him... that thought made him saddest of all.

"Taiki."

He suddenly felt like he was about to cry again, so Taiki quickly blinked his eyes.

"Yes."

"Would you like to come to Shiren Palace for a bit?"

Taiki lifted his head to look at Keiki. Keiki still had no expression on his face, but the hand with which he was holding Taiki's was very warm.

"But we have to go eat with Lady Gyokuyou..."

"It's only for a little bit."

"Okay..."

Keiki walked straight to Shiren Palace and told the welcoming nyosen to withdraw, as he took Taiki into the bedroom. The small yard to the east of the bedroom was surrounded by a towering cliff wall, the top portion of which was bathed in the light of the setting sun, causing the green moss to radiate. The light reflected into the room and highlighted the entire room with the color of the sun.

Keiki lightly patted Taiki's hand and released it. He stood in the center of the room, lifted his head slightly, and closed his eyes. As Taiki looked at him, with his head cocked to the side in uncertainty, something happened.

It was an unimaginable sight. Keiki's body began to shake and melt. It looked like the melting of glass or metal. The melted portion appeared to flash with a golden light and extended in all directions. After it extended, it seemed as if it was an article of clothing being flipped. Before Taiki could even shout, he saw only a beast standing in front of him.

"Ah..."

It happened in the matter of a few short seconds. The clothes that had originally been on the beast fell to the floor with a plop. The beast lowered his head a little bit, which had been held high, and turned to look at Taiki.

He still had those purple eyes, and that golden hair, no, mane. His neck was not as long as that of a giraffe, and his legs were like those of a deer, more slender than those of a horse. There were a few warmly yellow stripes upon his body, but only on his back. Also, it would be better to call them stripes, than to say that it was an interweaving pattern in his fur that appeared to change colors when looked at from different angles.

"Kirin..."

Taiki finally understood that he and a giraffe had nothing in common. They were, in fact, completely different creatures. His face was more similar to a deer's than the long face of a horse. On his forehead was a diverging horn, which made him feel even more like a deer, except that he only had one horn and it was shorter any deer's. His color was white and it was as if he radiated a pearly white metallic luster. Under the twilight, he emanated a muted red light.

A golden mane rested in a line upon his beautiful neck. Taiki remembered that Keiki's hair had grown all the way down to his knees, but it had obviously become much shorter after it changed into a mane. Besides becoming shorter, it had also become finer. The fluttering golden mane looked like a burning golden flame.

His hooves resembled a horse's, and his tail was longer than a deer's. The portion of the tail that was connected to the body was very thin. Again, it was not quite like a horse's tail; its length and thickness felt like it was somewhere between that of a cow and a horse.

"Kei Taiho... Is this...a kirin?"

"Yes."

He was not originally expecting the kirin to reply to him, but he heard the reply in Keiki's voice.

"It's not like I thought at all."

"Really?"

He walked closer to get a better look and realized that the kirin was a big animal. Even though it looked thin, it was probably a little smaller than a horse. He wanted to reach out and touch the kirin's soft sparkling fur, but when he recalled that this was Keiki, he couldn't help but hesitate.

"I had no idea that the kirin was such a beautiful creature."

Taiki just stood and stared, whereupon Keiki lowered his head so that it was closer to Taiki's nose.

"Do you like it?"

"I do!"

Taiki felt his face becoming red.

"Will I transform in this too?"

"You are a black kirin, so your color will probably be different."

"Right..."

He didn't know what it felt like to change into the form of a beast.

"Do your forelegs feel like arms?"

"No, the forelegs are just forelegs. After you've transformed, you will no longer feel like a person."

"The horn and tail don't feel especially different or anything?"

"The tail does not have much feeling. As for the horn...the base of the horn feels like a fire burning. It should be because your consciousness is all concentrated in this portion. Yes... When you transform, your entire consciousness comes together in your forehead."

Taiki tried to imitate Keiki and closed his eyes, as he tried to bring his consciousness into his forehead. Unfortunately, nothing happened. Taiki heaved a sigh.

"I don't think this is something I can learn very quickly."

"You don't need to worry."

"Yes. When you transform into this, you must be able to run really quickly, right?"

"Right. Also, kirin can gallop about in the Yellow Sea. If we ride the wind, we are faster than any sort of bird. As long as we're happy, we can even circle the entire world."

"Can you go to Hourai too? I heard that Hourai was at the most eastern edge of the world."

"We can, as long as you want to."

Taiki blinked his eyes.

To turn into such a beautiful beast and gallop across the entire world in the air, that must be a very satisfying experience. As long as he learned how to transform, whenever his loneliness was too hard to bear, he could secretly return home to look around!

"If you will consent to it, tomorrow morning I can let you ride on my back for a stroll."

"Really?"

"Yes. All right, you should go back to the palace first. Lady Gyokuyou is probably waiting for you. I will arrive shortly."

"Okay!"

Taiki bowed deeply.

"Kei Taiho, thank you very very much."



## CHAPTER SIX

1

"Originally, I was really worried..." Youka stopped her needlework. Since Taiki had arrived at Mt. Hou, he had grown a little bit. All his clothes had to be redone or lengthened.

"He's so close with Kei Taiho right now. It's so great." The nyosen who were doing needlework with Youka all laughed, and Youka laughed with them.

Youka will never forget the excited look on Taiki's face on the day he came running into the palace and told Youka that Keiki had showed him his transformation into a kirin, and that on the next day, he would let Taiki ride on his back for a stroll. He had been so happy, he didn't get to sleep until the middle of the night. The following day, Taiki came back to Houro Palace with a messy head of windblown hair, and again, was so excited that he almost couldn't sleep.

"Genkun never makes a mistake!" said a nyosen as she began to laugh.

"Recently, Kei Taiho has been emulating Taiki and is starting to pay attention to the feelings of the people around him. It feels so fresh and so fun to me."

"I know! Even though he still has no expression on his face."

Keiki had stayed at Mt. Hou a very long time, so he was not too reserved around them.

"Don't ask for too much!"

"That's for sure!"

The nyosen laughed together.

At this time, they heard the sound of light and quick footsteps coming from the direction of the path.

"I'm home!"

"Welcome back."

Taiki ran in with a messy lump of hair on his head and a joyful expression on his face. Two magical beasts followed by his side; one was Sanshi, and the other was Keiki's shirei, a youma called Hankyo.

"Where did you go today?"

"Kei Taiho took me to Mt. Ka, and I saw a lot of weird birds!"

Seeing Taiki smiling with such happiness, Youka couldn't help but smile as well. It looked like Taiki had already thought of Keiki completely as his older brother. However, at first, the nyosen would never have thought that a child could become close to Keiki.

"That's excellent."

"Kei Taiho said that he would take me to the Yellow Sea tomorrow and show me how to tame youma."

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Youka in a high voice. Hankyo laughed.

"Don't worry. We will accompany Taiki."

"Oh... That's right."

Keiki's shirei would be there, so it should be all right. Though Youka nodded at Hankyo, in her heart, she was still a little bit anxious. In the past, there have been kirin that met their end in the Yellow Sea. There, the youma will attack anyone, regardless of if they are human or kirin.

"All right, you should go take a quick bath. It's almost time for dinner."

"Okay!"

Taiki nodded and said to Sanshi and Hankyo, "Let's go!"

After Youka watched Taiki and the two beasts gradually fade into the distance, she put down her needlework.

"What's wrong?"

When Youka arrived at Shiren Palace, Keiki was just getting out of the springwater at Shiren Cave after a bath. After the springwater emerges out from Shiren Cave, it flows all the way into the lotus pond in front of the palace gate.

"I hear that you are going to take Taiki to the Yellow Sea."

"Oh, this," said Keiki quietly, as he brushed his wet hair back. "Nothing will happen. I will ask the shirei to protect Taiki closely."

"But..."

Keiki smile dryly. "You nyosen really do favor Taiki."

"Because even though Taiki is already ten years old, in regards to him being a kirin, he's still too young."

"You cannot say that." Keiki leaned on the gate and looked down at the lotus pond. "The summer solstice is only a half month away."

Youka hung her head.

"I just went to the Reikon Gate and it looked like were already over fifty riders waiting there."

"That many?"

Keiki nodded. "I had originally thought that since Tai was on the opposite side of the Reikon Gate, there wouldn't be as many people climbing the mountain. Perhaps they had not just come to climb, but have been walking around near the four gates, waiting for the Kirin Flag to rise."

Some people walk around along the Kongou Mountains. If they wait this way, after they see the Kirin Flag being raised, they can enter on the very next Ankou Day. This is because on an ordinary horse, it is not possible to make it to any of the gates in time for the Ankou Day after the flag is raised. Shortly after the summer solstice, these people will arrive at Hoto Palace.

"I am hoping that before the summer solstice, Taiki will possess a shirei."

Usually, those who wait by the four gates each believe that only they are the only true ruler, so their personalities are all extremely conceited and arrogant. If a person is reasonable, they need not worry, since most of those people are not only irrational, but also overly confident.

Keiki said further, "I cannot be away from my kingdom for too long. After all, the queen just ascended the throne not long ago, and moreover, the situation in the country is not very peaceful..."

"Kei Taiho, you're the one who really favors Taiki!"

Hearing Youka hold back a laugh as she said this, Keiki creased his brow.

"Otherwise you nyosen will accuse me of bullying him again."

"Indeed." Youka laughed as she took a bow towards Keiki. "Then please accommodate my request tomorrow."

"I won't allow him to get hurt, or else you nyosen will yell at me endlessly when you see me."

"Just don't forget what you've said today!"

2

"How about it?" asked Keiki as he handed over to Taiki a creature that was similar to a rabbit.

This was the entrance to the Yellow Sea, situated at the edge of the border between the Five Mountains and the Yellow Sea. It was a wilderness overgrown with bushes. The beast that Keiki handed over to Taiki looked like a rabbit with short ears or a big mouse with a long, thin body.

"Jakko? Or hiso?"

The youma in Taiki's hands obediently allowed him to carry it. Underneath the soft fur, he could feel its little heart beating.

"Jakko," replied the youma that he was holding in a rough voice. This was a small youma that Keiki had just tamed into being a shirei.

"Hiso is the name of this youma's species. This one is called Jakko."

Taiki nodded and scratched Jakko's neck.

"Nice to meet you."

Jakko didn't reply; he just made a few sounds.

"Does he not know how to speak very well yet?"

"Usually youma this small cannot really speak. At most, they can say a few single words."

It was Taiki who first discovered Jakko hiding in a bush and secretly watching them. When he was about to run away, Keiki directed an incantation towards him that Taiki could not understand, and when he looked back at Keiki, he glared at it for a moment. After Keiki finished another set of incantations, he called out Jakko's name, whereupon Jakko

obediently came over to his side.

So this was a taming. Taiki had felt a little disappointed because he had originally thought it was going to be an exciting spectacle.

"Are all tamings this easy?"

Hearing Taiki's question, Keiki shook his head. "It was very easy because the hiso is a small animal. It won't be that way with a bigger creature. At times, the confrontation can last half a day!"

"That long?"

Taiki was surprised. Keiki nodded and picked up Jakko. He gently stroked Jakko and put him on Hankyo's back. Jakko then jumped onto the side of Hankyo's ear and began playing with him.

"For instance, I expended quite a bit of effort in order to tame Hankyo."

"Wow..."

Hankyo laid upon a rock nonchalantly, and let Jakko play next to his ear.

"Just then when you were taming him, I thought you guys were just staring at each other."

Keiki smiled dryly.

"We certainly were staring at each other. But is you so much as lose focus for even a second, the youma will immediately take advantage of this opening and run away or attack you."

Taiki understood and nodded.

"The first to be distracted is the one who loses. If it's just a small youma that runs away, then it's not critical, but if it's a powerful youma, it just might exploit your carelessness and take your life. Thus, when a youma enters your field of vision, if you are not confident, run away quickly before you begin to glare at each other. However, if it's a very strong youma, you must transform into a kirin in order to get away from it."

"Oh..."

Seeing Taiki hang his head, Keiki hurriedly added, "Don't worry, your nyokai can buy you some time."

"Isn't that dangerous for the nyokai?"

Keiki forced another smile.

"If it's a youma you cannot defeat, your nyokai will warn you before you encounter it. Actually, as long as you pay more attention, you will also sense it. After all, we are beasts, so we are very sensitive to the presence of enemies."

Taiki stood blankly for a moment and then a confused smile appeared on his face.

"That's right. We're beasts... I forgot about that."

"It doesn't really matter if you forget something like this."

"Okay. Oh, how did you choose Jakko's name?"

Keiki looked at Jakko. This small youma didn't have the power to be a shirei. He could only go back to the royal palace and play as he wished in the garden.

"I didn't choose it. This name should be what he has always been called."

Taiki tilted his head and looked puzzlingly at Keiki.

"After you've glared for a bit and your opponent concedes his loss, his aggression will subside. At that time, you will be able to discern his name. Actually, I don't quite understand everything about it either, but this is probably how it is. In the blink of an eye, a name will suddenly appear in your mind, and when you shout out this name, the youma will come to your side and serve you. From then on he will always follow your orders, up until the moment you die. At that time, he will gain his freedom."

After he said this, Keiki smiled a little.

"As far as what characters to use for his name, just choose characters that match the sounds."

"I thought I heard you saying incantations just then."

"The incantations are not completely necessary, but if you know them, it makes it easier."

"Oh..."

Taiki sat down upon the rock though he looked like he still had some uncertainties, and Keiki sat beside him.

"When we want to tame youma and make them become our shirei, we must exchange pledges with them--It would probably be more appropriate to say that we bind them."

"Bind them?"

Keiki nodded.

"Youma have been excluded from the Providence of the Heavens, so what we're doing is reincorporating them into the Providence of the Heavens and binding them, in order that they not deviate from the way for a second time. If they let us bind them, then they become our shirei."

"I still don't understand it."

Keiki sighed.

"I'm sorry..."

Hearing Taiki apologize, Keiki hurriedly added, "You don't have to apologize. It is natural that you do not understand it."

"Yes..."

"This world was created by Tentei for the happiness of the people, and he established the Providence of the World. However, if this is so, why do people die and why do they get sick? Why are there youma in the world that attack people? Why do calamities occur? ...Do all of these things exist through the deep deliberations of the Heavens, or do they pass beyond them? Regardless of how it is, all of them go against Tentei's 'goodness.' This is an indisputable

fact."

Taiki thought for a little bit and then nodded.

"However, Tentei has his own intentions. They are not things that we can guess. It is like where there is life, there is also death. Because there is a Providence of the Heavens, there must also be some sort of opposite providence."

"Just like the light and the shadow?"

"Your analogy is very accurate. We kirin are shinju that exist to help the people. Still other magical creatures exist that have similar purposes. On the opposite side, there are also some magical creatures whose exist expressly to harm the people."

"Are those the youma?"

"Yes." Keiki smiled.

"So we should tame those creatures who are outside of the Providence of the Heavens and bring them back in, right?"

"That's exactly right. Speaking in terms of the analogy you used, the youma are creatures of the shadow, and in order to command them, we must pull them back into the light and bind them in order to prevent them from returning to the shadow."

"I understand now. But...how do I do that?"

Keiki sighed again.

"This is very hard to describe in words. Actually, I don't understand it completely either. I think I can only explain it in terms of will. That is, you must possess the power of a strong determination to pull these youma under your own control. However, it's not enough to simply have the determination."

Hearing Keiki say this, Taiki's face filled with uncertainty.

"Let me say it this way. All kirin possess a special 'power.' As to the magnitude of this power, it differs from kirin to kirin, but it is certain that every kirin possesses this special power."

"Is it because of this special power that kirin are all able to transform?"

"Yes, this is a power we are born with and have nothing to do with our will. Thus, no matter how much we hope to tame a youma, if our natural power is not strong enough, we will still be defeated in the end."

"It's just like people's physical strength or their running speed. They're all born with it."

"Right. You understand my meaning." Keiki sighed in relief. However, Taiki tilted his head again and spoke.

"But...using our strength to bind youma into the light side is a very difficult thing, rite? Can we not be distracted even for a second? If we do lose our attention a little bit, do our powers weaken?"

Keiki sighed again.

"I'm sorry..."

"You don't need to apologize. Perhaps...I am being too hard on you by saying these things." After Keiki said this, he deepened his voice. "You must listen to me calmly. --Shirei will eat kirin."

"Huh?"

"More accurately, they eat the corpses of kirin. After they eat a kirin's corpse, they are able to possess the kirin's power for themselves."

Taiki turned back to look at Hankyo. Hankyo, who had been resting his large head between his forelegs, turned to look with his expressionless face. Taiki couldn't tell from his behavior any changes in his heart.

Keiki smiled uneasily.

"You don't need to be afraid. Hankyo will not attack you. Kirin are part of the light, and youma are part of the shadow. Unless we specifically give it to them, they cannot take our power without our permission."

"Y...yes."

"Kirin rely on their power to tame youma and pull them into the light. However, youma have their own innate magical powers, so in order to tame a powerful youma, you must have the power to match him. Youma will, from the power a kirin uses when he is taming them, measure that kirin's abilities."

"Yes..."

"They will assume that after the kirin dies, his power will be given to them, so they will first determine if it will be worth it to become this kirin's shirei."

"I think I understand what you're saying."

"If you have successfully tamed a youma, they will never refuse your command, because they know that after you die, your power becomes theirs."

"So that's why you said it was a pledge?"

"Right. Because in order to take a creature from the shadow and put them in the light in a way that they not return once again to the shadow, it is necessary to bind up their chain, and to also protect ourselves."

"So that they can live under the light?"

"Yes. The chain that binds the shirei and protects us is their 'name.' Kirin rely on their will to draw forth a youma and discern his name. And then, the kirin formally confers this name upon the youma and accepts him as his shirei. The youma then determines the power of the kirin through the kirin's will and accepts the kirin's command while keeping the right to acquire the kirin's power after his death. This is what taming is."

"Then the youma eats the kirin's body after he dies, obtains new powers, and then regains his freedom once again?"

"Right. However, the conditions are that when a youma is the kirin's shirei, he absolutely must not defy his kirin. He can only use all his strength to protect his kirin, but never harm him."



Taiki took a close look at Hankyo. He had originally thought he was an interesting creature, but now he felt like he was completely impenetrable.

Hankyo glanced at Taiki and then opened his mouth widely.

"...!"

Taiki crouched down in fright. Hankyo yawned casually and smiled.

"Hankyo!" Keiki smiled dryly as he rebuked him.

"Actually, older kirin all use a few tricks. Do you know what divination is?"

"Do you mean like fortune-telling?"

"You could call it that. When we are hunting powerful youma, we borrow some techniques from divination or sorcery, geomancy, those types of things. However, these are all very profound areas of study. If you ask the nyosen, they will teach you, but it isn't something you can learn in a short amount of time."

"Yes."

"We must first choose the day, the land, the direction and the youma. When we subdue the youma, we seek a situation where the youma's powers are weakest, and where we are strongest. However, even if you don't plan it out like this, it doesn't mean that you won't be able to subdue the youma. It is the same with the incantations. Because the effects are not as powerful as in divination or sorcery, they are not essential. But if you are used to saying them, then when you don't say them, it will feel strange. That's all."

"Then does it matter if I don't learn them?"

"Would you like to learn them? Even a little will help you out."

Taiki nodded. Keiki then reached out his hand and held onto his shoulder to straighten his posture.

"First of all, you must have proper posture. You must engrave this in your mind."

"Yes."

"Spirit is divided into seiki, the spirit of life, and shiki, the spirit of death. The morning is full of seiki, while the afternoon, shiki. It is best to tame youma in the early morning, which is filled with seiki. The air that we inhale through our noses is seiki, and the air that we exhale from our mouths is shiki. When you're breathing, you must pay attention to this. You must never reverse this. When you exhale, you should exhale lightly. This is also something you should practice during ordinary times. Otherwise, it will be hard to make a habit out of it."

"I should breathe in through my nose and breathe out through my mouth."

"When you want to avoid youma, you should employ the Uho walk."

Keiki demonstrated a special method of walking for Taiki.

"If you encounter a youma and you want to avoid eye contact with them, then you should use Koushi, Teeth-striking. The Tsuitenban works especially well, wherein you firmly bite down the right part of your jaw. If you want to concentrate your spirit, sound your front teeth. This is called Meitenko."

Taiki sighed. "Can I really remember all of this?"

"You can remember them very quickly, but in order to perform them skillfully, you must still practice. You only need to ask the nyosen and they can all teach them to you."

"Okay."

"Just then, I used the Nine-word Mantra to stop Jakko from running away. You need to hold your hands like so."

Taiki imitated Keiki's clasped hands.

"This is called the Sword Seal. Ready your hands at your waist, draw your sword, and then perform four verticals and five horizontals."

Keiki took Taiki's hands and gestured with them.

"Now say, 'Rin, Byou, Tou, Sha, Kai, Jin, Retsu, Zen, Gyou.'"

"...This is really hard."

"You'll be able to say it with some more practice. The movements must be well-executed. Once you see your opponent lose his aggression, you need to say an incantation. However, this requires knowledge of divination. Just remember this much for now: 'Shinchoku Meichoku, Tensei Chisei. Jinkun Seikun, Fuo Fudaku. Kimi Koubuku, Onmyou Wagou. Kyukyu Nyo Ritsurei!'"

Taiki looked very anxiously up at Keiki, and Keiki forced a smile.

"Kimi Koubuku, the monster submits; Onmyou Wagou, the light and the dark unite. Kyukyu Nyo Ritsurei, quickly according to the laws."

"Um... Okay."

"And then put your right hand on your head with your palm facing outward to receive the Will of the Heavens, and your left hand should be pointing down toward your feet. Then, call out the name of the youma. Sometimes only the sound of his name appears in your mind, and sometimes the characters for them will also appear. All of this is instinctive to a kirin."

"Yes."

Taiki heaved a sigh. Keiki patted a very discouraged looking Taiki.

"We still have a bit of time before the shiki spreads through, so go find a few small youma and practice a little."

Taiki nodded. However, at the end of the day, not one youma fell under the spell of his incantations.

The summer solstice finally arrived.

Taiki was sound asleep in his bed when Sanshi tried to stir him awake.

Yesterday--or more accurately, it wasn't until very early this morning that Taiki returned from the Yellow Sea, out cold in Sanshi's arms. She looked at his expression as he was sleeping deeply, and although she was not heartless enough to want to wake him up, if she had let him continue sleeping, Taiki would certainly regret it very much.

"Are you awake yet, Taiki?"

Suddenly, Youka's voice carried itself over here, and the cloth curtain was lifted open. Youka poked her head in to look around, and she smirked.

"Oh, really..." Youka smiled and looked at Sanshi. "It looks like he played until really late yesterday. Any results?"

Sanshi shook her head.

Even though they stayed in the Yellow Sea until the middle of the night, in the end he still wasn't able to subdue a youma. Keiki and the nyosen were at one side helping him out with the divination, but the youma were still able to escape Taiki's glare. Though neither of them said it, Keiki and Sanshi both knew that Taiki was not aggressive enough.

"I see... Then he must have been very discouraged. Even though we may not want to, we should still wake him up."

Sanshi nodded and shook Taiki again. "Taiki..."

Youka completely lifted up the curtain, letting the sunlight in. "Taiki, get up quickly, or else Kei Taiho will have left."

"Oh..." Taiki finally moved a little bit. However, he flipped over and again they heard his level breathing.

"Well..."

"Well, he is still a child."

Hearing someone behind them, Youka and Sanshi hurriedly looked back toward the entrance.

"Genkun!"

Gyokuyou laughed softly. "It looks like we can't wake him up."

"We were out so late yesterday. Just let him sleep," said Keiki who had been behind Gyokuyou.

Hearing this, Youka became flustered. "That would be too impolite. Taiki, it's time to get up now."

"It's no use. Let him get a good rest."

Hearing Keiki say this, Youka shook her head vigorously. "I can't. That way when Taiki gets up, he'll be very sad."

Sanshi nodded her head in agreement.

Sanshi knew that Taiki had returned last night, having completely exhausted his mind and body, but she also knew why he hadn't wanted to go to sleep. Thus, she shook Taiki's body with more force. "Taiki! Taiki!"

After being shaken three times, Taiki finally opened his eyes. He first blinked a little bit, and then suddenly jumped up. "The Taiho..."

Sanshi brushed his hair. "He's still here."

Taiki blinked his eyes again, and then he saw all the adults smiling as they watched him. He face flushed as he lowered his head.

"I'm sorry... Good morning everybody."

"Genkun, Taiho, we're very sorry. Taiki doesn't usually delay getting out of bed."

Gyokuyou smiled as she received the teacup that Youka had handed her, and then looked at Keiki.

"It looks like Taiki really thinks of you as his brother. This really is too good."

Keiki had only a gloomy look on his face.

"Kei Taiho, you've really helped us out a lot."

Hearing Gyokuyou say this, Youka smiled without saying anything. However, Keiki sighed.

"But I was still not able enough. For that, I profusely apologize."

"All those inherent abilities that we're born with have always impossible to explain in words. You've done so much for him already, and we're very grateful."

Keiki looked even more discouraged. After Gyokuyou finished saying this with a smile, having finished grooming and changing his clothes, Taiki and Sanshi walked out together.

"I'm really sorry."

Putting down his teacup, Keiki stood up and took a bow towards Taiki. "Taiki, I must bid you farewell now."

Taiki looked up at Keiki with his reddened eyes. "Do you really have to go?"

"I can't be away from my kingdom for that long. I'm sorry I was not able to help you out much."

"What do you mean? I should be the one apologizing to you. I was such a bad student."

"You were no such thing."

"Please take care."

"You as well."

"I will."

Keiki looked at Taiki who was holding back his tears with all his restraint, and he put his hand on his shoulder.

"Don't be anxious. The Heavens created the kirin. Tentei will aid you."

"Yes..."

"I hope you meet your ruler early on. After you have descended to your kingdom, Kei Kingdom is just across the Empty Sea, so we will have opportunities to meet again then."

Hearing Keiki say this, Taiki tugged on Keiki's sleeves with his small hands. "Will we really be able to meet again?"

Keiki smiled. Seeing Taiki so eager to see him again, it made him very happy.

"I guarantee it. When you go to your kingdom, I will definitely be the first to come congratulate you."

Hearing this, Taiki's little face glowed with radiance. "Okay!"

If he could have, Keiki would have liked to stay until Taiki had successfully subdued a shirei, and also until he had received, without any problems, all those who will climb Mt. Hou. However, that was not possible. He had already been away from Kei Kingdom for too long. In addition, before he had left, he had also informed them that he would definitely be back on the summer solstice at the very latest.

"Where are you leaving from?"

"From Hakki Palace."

"Then can I accompany you to there?"

Keiki smiled. "Of course you can. We should tell Hankyo and Jakko to come as well."

"Yes."

Gyokuyou stood up as well and looked at the big kirin and the small kirin in front of her. "Is Taiki also very close with your shirei?"

"Hankyo often plays with me."

"That's excellent," said Gyokuyou with a smile. She then looked at Keiki, whose hand was still on the little kirin's shoulder.

"Kei Taiho, your achievements have certainly not been small. You've learned how best to act towards people."

"But..." Taiki looked up at Gyokuyou. "Kei Taiho has always been very nice to me!"

Hearing Taiki's serious tone, Gyokuyou glanced at Youka. "Is that so?"

"Yes!" said Taiki with determination. Gyokuyou laughed. Keiki had a complicated expression on his face. All the other nyosen in the room, including Youka, stifled their laughter.

Neither the nyosen nor even Gyokuyou would have expected that Keiki's awkwardly-expressed kindness would actually be the reason that Queen Kei Jokaku lost her way.

However, that is another story.

4

After he saw Keiki off, Taiki looked extremely depressed. However, in reality, Taiki no longer had the time to be sad.

From the day after the solstice on, nyosen could be seen everywhere, along the all the paths to Hoto Palace. The grand incense ceremony was performed at Hoto Palace, and the nyosen were all also wearing bright and colorful attire. Both the furnishings in the palace and Taiki's clothes were much more magnificent than during ordinary times.

--The festival season had arrived upon Mt. Hou.

Taiki was sitting on a rock near the Shashinboku. When walking inside of the maze, the winds always carried with them the scent of flowers, but at the top of the rocks, the wind held only the smell of the sea. Taiki had always considered this to be incredible.

It seemed as if something was approaching from the southwest.

Taiki thought of the views of the Yellow Sea that he saw when he was riding on the transformed Keiki's back.

Mt. Hou was a mountain that consisted of mounds of strange crags. Green rocks were assembled into a complex landscape that extended all the way down to the foot of the mountain. And though the maze that was formed by these rocks also looked very complicated, there was only one route that reached Hoto Palace. Starting from a long, long time ago, countless shousen had walked through that path and had already left a deep mark that was clearly visible from up high.

Since there was only one route, there was also only one entrance into Mt. Hou, and the path through the entrance was linked in three directions.

A road stretched across the Yellow Sea. Like the path to Hoto Palace, this road had passed through a good many years, and there was a trace left by the treading of countless people. There were tracks thru the rocks and ruts carved into the steep slopes, all made by people's feet. People had thrown stones into the swamps and streams, and even erected stone tablets in the desert. Across the wider fissures in the great crags, people had built bridges with withered wood; trees had been removed by passers-by, so that eventually there formed a narrow pathway through the dense forests.

These sorts of trails extended through the Yellow Sea in all directions to the four gates.

Of these gates, the Reikon Gate in the southwest had already opened and closed. Where were the people now, who had entered the gate on the day of the summer solstice?

Youma and youju gathered in the Yellow Sea, so the journey through it was, without doubt, full of difficulty and danger. The people who enter the gate on the same day form a group similar to a caravan, and work together to traverse this dangerous passage. It is also said that there exists even a profession that specializes in protecting them, like a travel escort service.

"My heart is beating really quickly..." mumbled Taiki, as he hugged his knees and rested his chin on top of them.

Sanshi, who was sitting beside him, heard this, and just said quietly, "Don't be nervous."

"Okay..."

This matched up completely to his premonition.

When he was playing or learning a few easier divination lessons from the nyosen, if he so much as looked out into the southwest, he would suddenly feel as if he couldn't breathe. And when he recalled that the Reikon Gate was in the southwest, he would feel a chill and his heart would beat faster.

This was not a good premonition. He always felt something scary was making its way to him.

"Can I really do it?"

"Of course you can." Sanshi said only this short sentence. Thus, the sound of the wind seemed even clearer as it remained by Taiki's ear.

"Do you think there's a real ruler here?"

"I don't know."

"There probably isn't, I think."

"Do you wish there not to be?"

"Yeah..."

Sanshi looked at her stiff-bodied master hugging his knees.

If there really was an actual ruler here, was Taiki afraid that he would then have to leave Mt. Hou, or that he would not be able to pass this test?

Regardless of why, Sanshi very clearly felt Taiki's anxiety after the summer solstice had passed. This pained Sanshi's heart even when she was just by his side.

If the people climbing up Mt. Hou were not those that think themselves the ruler, then they were those that were supporting those with the abilities to be the ruler. Thus, the real ruler was not necessarily amongst them.

Or perhaps, Taiki was afraid to find his ruler.

After kirin go through the process of choosing their ruler, they carry the fate of the kingdom upon their shoulders. In addition, the ruler's conduct in government carries upon it the fate of the kirin.

As soon as the ruler strays from the proper path, the kirin must bear the consequences. At that time, he will suffer a sickness called Shitsudou. This is a serious illness that is not easy to cure. Thus, it could be said that the ruler holds the life of the kirin in his hands.

To entrust one's own fate to another person is naturally a very frightening prospect.

"The real ruler won't climb the mountain this early..." It was very obvious that Taiki had said this for his own ears.

Thus, Sanshi didn't say anything.

Taiki didn't have any shirei, nor could he transform, and he still only understood a small amount about being a kirin. In this situation, it was normal to feel apprehensive. No one callously blamed him for it.

"Kei Taiho, he..." Taiki looked from the southwest to Sanshi. "He said it, right? That the Heavens would help me out?"

Taiki looked up into the sky again, and even though his face carried the innocence of a child, it revealed a resolve.

"Yes."

The wind on top of the rock blew by swiftly.

**To be continued in *Sea of the Wind, Shore of the Maze*, vol. 2**

## AFTERWORD TO VOLUME ONE

Hello, everybody.

I don't know when it started, but there's been a *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* boom recently, and as a result, Chinese-style fantasy stories are getting popular. It startled me because I was afraid that the readers would immediately see through my superficial knowledge of China.

This story is a sequel to the previous work that I did for *White Heart*, *Shadow of the Moon*, *Sea of the Shadow*. They contain two separate stories, and this one happens at an earlier time than the other one, but it is still basically a sequel.

The following is something I want to say to the readers of the previous work.

It seems like everything Taiki says goes through, but actually the people on Mt. Hou can't understand him. That's right, it's just like in the last book where everything needed to be translated. Because the story this time is more complicated (there are a ton of kanji that Taiki doesn't know), and also whether or not I mentioned the translators wasn't important, so I didn't write out that portion. However, in my head, I have established that all their words go through an interpreter, so fellow readers, please keep this in mind as well. (To think that I had to ask the readers to accommodate me like this...) \*pekori\* [note: this is the sound of ono-sensei bowing her head quickly]

The previous book received a good response from readers, so it's because of you that there is a sequel. Thank you very much! I hope that I can write yet another sequel. However...I need to get rid of this habit of needing to separate books into two volumes... Tohoho.

I hope everyone can continue on and read the next volume.

--Ono Fuyumi

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"Taiki, you can leave the palace today."

The summer solstice had actually passed some time ago, but it wasn't until now that Teiei spoke these words.

The day had finally arrived. Taiki put down the chopsticks with which he was using to eat breakfast.

"Yes..."

He had gotten up earlier this morning than usual, and even the clothes that Sanshi had prepared for him were all much more ornate than usual. Taiki had already mentally prepared himself for this.

Youka patted his back gently. "You don't have to be this nervous."

"Youka, will you accompany me when I go?"

Youka smiled. "Yes. I'll also be by your side the whole time."

"What about Sanshi?" Taiki had a feeling that she would say no.

Teiei nodded and her answer wasn't far from the one he wanted to hear. "Of course Sanshi will come with you. Except, Sanshi has to hide herself. You might not be able to see her, but she'll definitely be nearby."

Taiki heaved a disappointed sigh. If Sanshi had to hide nearby, that meant that when the time came, she wouldn't be holding his hand, not to mention that she wouldn't be able to gently stroke his back.

"I understand..."

Teiei and Youka were in the front, followed by over ten ceremonial nyosen, and Taiki was in the middle as they walked onto the small paths, all the way to the gate of Houro Palace without stopping.

The nyosen in front of him took down the bolt of the door.

Before the door was opened, Taiki remembered the vast wilderness that was the exterior of the maze, but after the door was opened, the scene outside had undergone a complete change.

The towering crags stretched out in layers, creating waves upon waves of green, and between these rocks was an expansive grassland, upon which there was a flood of colors. Tents had been pitched one after another, and countless flags had been raised everywhere. Fences had been built with stakes to which horses and unusual animals had been tied, and on which harnesses and cloths had been hung to dry. Not to mention that there was a variety of people, dressed in a variety of styles.

Just like this, a busy little village had appeared.

Taiki began to feel apprehensive and couldn't help but grab Teiei's hand.

"There is no need to be afraid. Would you like to adjust your breathing?"

Taiki used his eyes to express consent and then straightened his chest even more and took a deep breath.

Teiei held his hand and prepared to walk forward. A man at a nearby tent saw this and knelt down to bow. This movement spread outward like a ripple, as the people scattered about the grass in discussion all knelt down to bow.

Taiki tightened his grip on Teiei's hand, as he looked straight ahead at the quivering hairpins on the heads of the nyosen walking in front of him, hoping to rely on this to shake off the torment of being stared at by innumerable eyes.

"Are you still all right?" asked Youka's gentle voice from behind.

"Yes... Can we speak?"

"Yes, there's no need to be so shy."

"Okay."

The ceremony seemed not to be as difficult as he had thought it was going to be. At this, he heaved a sigh of relief.

"Is this all the people?"

Teiei replied, "No, only half of them have come first."

"Oh, good..."

When he looked around, he saw a great many people wearing armor. There were many very young people and a lot of old people as well, and there were numerous men, but also lots of women.

"I didn't think there would be so many women here."

Teiei smiled, but her smile was not as natural as it usually was, as if she were suppressing her emotions. It was probably because Teiei was also very nervous, but just had a different way of expressing it.

"Well, of course... would you rather serve under a king or a queen?"

"I don't know."

The road from the great gate to Hoto Palace was paved with stones. Many adults had gathered on either side of the road, kneeling down with their heads lowered. This sort of scene looked unnatural.

"Why is everyone bowing?"

"They are paying their respects to you." Teiei knew that had she used the word "status" to explain it to Taiki, he probably wouldn't understand, so she stopped herself from using it.

"Should I greet them?"

"You do not need to right now. If you wish to speak to someone, you can invite them to stand up."

"Can I chat with them?"

"You may after the incense ceremony. Then, you can ask them whatever you want."

"There are a lot of big animals here..."

"Those are youju. Everyone has ridden their youju here."

"Oh..."

Some of the beasts looked like tigers, and others looked like lions, while still others looked like horses and cows.

"Can youju be subdued too?"

"Youju are caught, and after they're tamed, they go through training. Come, and watch your step. After we go inside, please remember to bow towards the altar once."

Taiki stopped looking around, turning his eyes forward, and realized that Hoto Palace was right in front of him.

Hoto Palace was not quite like the structures inside Houro Palace, as all four sides had walls, and as soon as he was out of the view of all those people, Taiki was really able to heave a sigh of relief.

The interior of Hoto Palace was both high and spacious, and an altar faced the entrance; it felt a lot like the central hall of a temple.

Taiki did as Teiei said, and after he bowed towards the altar, he walked to the wall and made an incense offering. Then he was taken onto a platform adjacent to the wall on the right side of the room. If this were a Japanese-style room, we could say that the platform was about eight tatami mats wide. It was backed by the wall of the palace, while bamboo blinds hung down on the other three sides. The blinds facing the front had already been pulled up, and inside there was a chair. When sitting on the chair, one could see everything between the entrance to Hoto Palace and the altar.

Taiki sat peacefully in the seat and quietly watched as the nyosen busily offered incense. Suddenly feeling eager eyes gazing upon him, he looked over and realized that many people had gathered at the entrance to Hoto Palace. After the nyosen finished offering incense, a large portion of them came to the platform in succession. When they had all assembled themselves on the platform, the blinds were then lowered. Taiki heaved a sigh.

"You should feel much more relaxed now," said Teiei as she smiled.

"I get really nervous when so many people are staring at me."

"You'll get used to it in no time."

"Can I call Sanshi to come here?"

"Yes, as long as the blinds are down."

After Teiei said this, Taiki called upon Sanshi, and in the blink of an eye, she appeared next to his feet. He laid on her leopard portion as she wrapped her arms around him, making him feel much more at ease. Sanshi comforted Taiki by hugging his head, and Taiki felt that her hands were so warm.

"You look so nervous. But actually, you don't need to be so tense," said Teiei with a smile.

"My mind knows this, but my body isn't listening to its commands... What do I do now?"

"Those who've climbed the mountain will come and offer incense. Before we return, all that is required of you is watch them one by one as they do so. If you become bored with this, you may go outside and chat with the people outside."

When Teiei had finished speaking, there was already a person inside of the palace offering incense. The movements of this first person to come in were abnormally stiff, and he walked like that up to the altar.

"Taiki, do you feel any ouki?" inquired Teiei next to Taiki's ear. Taiki shook his head, signifying that he didn't know. Teiei understood what meaning Taiki was expressing.

"No matter. If you do feel the ouki, then you can call us to you and whisper it to us."

"Okay..."

The person for whom offering incense was not easy, walked in front of the platform, and after taking a bow, he kneeled down. This man was old enough to be someone's father, and his build was big and fat, like that of a sumo wrestler. Taiki struggled to listen to what the nyosen and the man were talking about by the platform. However, the revelation--up to now, Taiki still wasn't clear on how it would manifest itself--did not seem to come with this man.

Seeing Teiei's expression of inquiry, Taiki shook his head.

Nothing strange happened that could have been the revelation.

2

Taiki quietly watched people entering one after another to offer incense, and after two days, he began to feel bored. On the fourth day, he finally decided that he wanted to walk around outside.

The offering of incense occurs for only a few hours in the morning. Taiki sat on the platform and watched those offering incense. At first, he had thought that these people who weren't nyosen were very refreshing. Since everyone's appearance and clothes each had their own special traits, it was interesting to see everybody's differences. However, very quickly, he began to feel that sitting in the chair was very bothersome.

He only had to stay until noon before he could return to the palace, but the length of time that he had to sit was too long.

"Can I walk around outside?"

As soon as they heard Taiki ask this, the nyosen on the platform twittered with joy, because they had also felt bored.

"Of course you can," replied Youka with a big smile on her face.

"Were you all just waiting for me to ask this?"

"Not completely," said Youka as she laughed. "However, I can't say that it hasn't been a little annoying, because, since this morning, we've already seen Pumpkin Daibu's face six times."

Though the nyosen tried to suppress their laughter, they were unable to hold it in and began laughing.

Among those who have offered incense, some will do it several times a day. And of those people, the first person to enter the palace and perform the rite on the first day had come every day and offered incense at least ten times before

Taiki returned to Houro Palace. That man looked like a daibu from some kingdom, and his face was round and red, like a pumpkin, so they privately gave him the nickname, "Pumpkin Daibu."

"Will it be dangerous for me to go outside?"

Teiei smiled and said, "We'll all be by your side. With this many people, you shouldn't worry. Even if we did encounter someone up to no good, you can believe that the people in the vicinity will not stand idly by. They will definitely help you out, because everyone wants you to see their best side."

Ten foolish people who had tried to sneak into Houro Palace had already been expelled from Mt. Hou, but none of the nyosen intended to inform Taiki of such a thing.

"I see..."

"When the time comes, a lot of people will surround you and want to greet you, but that would be better than sitting here as if you were doing penance, right? I think for sure that there will be those who are too impatient to wait for a ruler to be chosen, and I'm afraid that you'll eventually you'll be scared by all the flattering."

"Then...what do I say to them?"

"If you find the ruler, then you follow the ancient customs and bow before him..."

"And then I vow never to abandon him, never to disobey his royal command, and pledge my loyalty to him?"

Teiei nodded. "Correct."

"What if they're not the ruler?"

"Since it's the summer solstice right now, it's tradition to say, I wish you well from the solstice until the equinox, or you could say, I wish you well from the equinox until the solstice."

"So I just wish them well until the next Ankou Day."

"Yes."

"What if I can't figure it out and I mess up?"

Teiei smiled and comforted Taiki. "Don't worry. That won't happen."

"Will Sanshi come with me?"

"Sanshi will hide herself nearby. However, you must not call her out when we're amongst the big crowds. If you do that, she'll frighten the horses and kiju."

The nyosen on the platform surrounded Taiki, and they all walked towards the outside of the palace. The nyosen that were not on the platform could only look on with envy, since it was their responsibility to stay in the palace for the whole day and look after the people offering incense, as well as handle the various problems of those who had climbed the mountain.

To those who want to become the ruler, it could be said that the mountain-climbing season is a magnificent ceremony. For the nyosen, it could also be counted as an amusing activity.

Extremely few regret becoming a nyosen, but living such a long time still makes some of them weary. Over the summer solstice, the nyosen spend a lot of time on their appearances, though it wasn't done to convey their dignity. The nyosen teased the men who had climbed the mountain with their affection for fun. While this went on, the playing would sometimes become serious, and it's not unheard of for a nyosen to descend the mountain with a man.

It had not been easy for Taiki to leave the palace, so it was unfortunate that the first person that came to greet him was the aforementioned Pumpkin Daibu. He must have set up his camp near Hoto Palace, so that when Taiki and his group came out of the palace, he could immediately hurry to him with the utmost speed.

It sounded like something heavy had been dropped onto the ground when he kneeled down, and he hit his forehead upon the ground probably because he used too much force as he was preparing to bow. The nyosen tried with all their strength to keep straight faces, but after seeing this, they couldn't contain their laughter anymore, nor could the other people who had gathered around and seen him.

"M...Mt. Hou Kou, you look very pleasant today." Pumpkin Daibu was so nervous that the tone of his voice sounded strange. "I am the Shiba of Sui Province in Tai Kingdom. I am called Rohaku. I...I'm originally from Nan'you County in Ba Province--"

Since he was crouched on the ground and speaking quickly, and also stuttering because he was nervous, Taiki couldn't hear very clearly the flattery that was directed toward him.

"It is an extreme privilege to be able to pay my respects to your honorable self today! I wish the Kou a very long life!"

Taiki didn't know what to do, so he glanced up at Youka. She then raised her eyebrows a little towards him. He understood the meaning in her eyes, and said to the man who was bowing, "I wish you well...until the equinox."

The man immediately looked up, and then his shoulders suddenly drooped.

"...Re-really? I... I see..." said the man, thinking outloud as a dejected expression came to his face. Youka stifled her laughter and lightly pressed Taiki's back.

"Let's go. Just do as you did as we walk around."

Taiki was surrounded by a group of nyosen who were looking back at the men again and again as they walked. After a stretch of road, one of the nyosen quietly said to Taiki, "It's a good thing you stopped him from saying more. Who knows how long we would have had to listen to him otherwise!"

"...I couldn't find an opportunity to interrupt."

"Thank goodness he won't become your master, or else he wouldn't have been worthy to serve under."

Seeing the relief on the nyosen's face, Taiki tilted his head and asked, "Was that guy not good?"

"If you discover the revelation, it doesn't matter if the person is good or bad. It's just that it would be too embarrassing for Tai Kingdom if even a pumpkin like that could become the king. Although it isn't too important whether the ruler looks good or not, all people are even a little bit vain. At the very least, the person who becomes the ruler should have a bit of dignity."

"Is...that so?"

Youka smiled and said, "Don't listen to their nonsense. The most important thing is whether or not you receive the revelation."

The other nyosen heard Youka explaining things to Taiki so earnestly yet again and lightly flared up at her. "Come now, Youka. You say that, but from ancient times until now, has an ugly person ever become the ruler?"

"Right, right. That's because a person's dignity can be seen from their appearance. Moreover, those who want to become ruler, whether it's their looks or their personality, must fit with the manner of a ruler."

"When we're out in public, speak a little more quietly," warned Youka softly, and the nyosen immediately stopped talking.

Youka saw this and couldn't help but smile. She bent down and said to Taiki, "Don't mind their idle talk. Your duty is to wait for the appearance of the revelation."

"Okay..."

3

Many people surrounded Taiki and continuously flattered him, but Taiki didn't feel anything unusual happen.

The number of mountain-climbers, together with all their servants, added up to more than three-hundred people. Besides the masters who had come to see if they could become the ruler, the servants that followed them also had the opportunity to be chosen the ruler.

There many who saw Taiki and rushed to be near him, but there were also people who saw him and chose not to speak with him since they hadn't planned on going forward and talking with him. The nyosen had also once mentioned to him that even if he didn't talk with the ruler, he would still recognize the ruler's presence. Unfortunately, no sort of revelation showed itself to him.

Regardless of whether it was the people who were talking to him or the people who were not, their eyes were all filled with anticipation. When he thought about the fact there was no way to fulfill the expectations of most of them in the end, Taiki couldn't help but feel sorrowful.

After getting a break from the crowds, Taiki heaved a sigh. Youka heard it and was concerned, so she tried to gauge his mood.

"Are you tired?"

"No. It's just that meeting so many people in so short a time..."

"It's already past noon. Would you like to return to Hoto Palace? You probably want to rest a little bit. Or, we could just go straight back to Houro Palace."

"Yeah..."

Taiki nodded and looked around. He spotted something and yanked on Youka's hand.

"Youka, look! That dog has wings!"

Not far from the tents, a huge dog had been tied up among the horses. At the moment, a few men and women were tending to this mount.

"That is a tenba. Would you like to go over and look at it?"

"Can I?"

"No problem." Youka held Taiki's hand and lead him closer to the tent that the dog had been tied to.

The dog's shape was enormous with a white body and a black head, not to mention a pair of wings folded against its back. It was beautiful.

"Isn't this...Mt. Hou Kou? I wish you the best of health." Among the men and women who were caring for the tenba, a tall and strong woman recognized Taiki and hurried to pay him her respects.

"Is this tenba your mount?"

"Yes."

"Would you let the Kou see him for a moment?"

"It would be my honor."

The woman smiled and encouraged Taiki to get closer to the tenba. Under Youka's protection, Taiki moved slowly towards it with apprehension and realized that in reality, the tenba was much bigger than he had first thought it to be.

"He's so big..." Taiki mumbled.

"He's actually relatively smaller compared to most tenba," replied the woman who had kneeled down. It looked as if out of all the people who were taking care of it, she was his master.

"Please get up. May I pet him?"

"Thank you, Mt. Hou Kou. Of course you may pet him. His behavior is quite docile."

After he heard her say this, he hesitated a moment and then cautiously reached his hand out. The fur of the tenba looked shiny, but it felt much harder than it looked. Taiki rubbed its neck, and the tenba closed its eyes with a comfortable look on its face.



"He's really tame... Does he have a name?"

"He is called Hien."

"Hien," repeated Taiki. With its eyes still closed, Hien nuzzled against Taiki's hand as he stroked it under the ears.

"Does he bite?"

"Don't worry. He doesn't randomly bite people. Tenba are already a relatively docile kind of youju. Moreover, Hien's personality is especially gentle. It's very clear to him that there are people whom he should not bite."

"How smart."

Taiki talked with the woman about tenba for a good stretch of time. He was very interested in how she caught the tenba, how she takes care of it, and what it feels like to ride upon its back.

The woman's answers were very easy to understand. In addition, her tone was kind, her words polite, and her voice was very clear. It all gave Taiki the sense that she was a strong person.

To be honest, Taiki could still not determine an adult's age by looking at them. He could only guess from her appearance that she was probably older than Youka and Teiei by a lot.

Though, this could possibly just be due to the impressions she held. It was very hard to compare the impressions of the nyosen to regular people, so he also felt like the woman's age was very far from a nyosen's.

Nyosen in general are all very pretty. They always wore beautiful clothes and ornate hairpins, each one more extraordinary than the next.

Opposite to that, this woman wore deep-colored men's clothing and had not even one accessory upon her body. Her dark brown hair had also not been arranged into a knot, but instead, it hung freely down to her shoulders. She was tall and her movements were graceful and gentle. She was pretty, but it was completely different than the beauty of Gyokuyou and the nyosen. It was very obvious that she was a different type of person.

"Thank you for letting me look at Hien." Taiki was reluctant to take his hand off of Hien's body.

"It was nothing. I believe Hien was also very happy."

"Where are you from?"

"I am from Jou Province. I am a General of the Jou Provincial Army, called Risai. My name is Ryushi."

A glimmer entered Taiki's eyes.

Every kingdom has nine provinces, each of which is ruled by a Shukou, a provincial governor. The military that the Kou controls is called the Army of the Provincial Kou, which is shortened to simply the Provincial Army. The size of this military varies in each province from two armies to four, depending on how big the province is. Thus, it follows that for each province, there are anywhere from two to four people holding the rank of general.

"So you are a general." No wonder she felt so different from the nyosen.

"Yes, to the best of my ability."

Since Taiki got along so exceptionally well with her, he couldn't bear to disappoint her, but no matter which way he looked at it, he had not received the revelation.

"...I wish you well until the equinox."

Risai's face revealed a sliver of a self-deprecating smirk, but it lasted only a very short moment. She immediately recovered her previous smile and bowed to Taiki.

"Thank you very much. I respectfully wish you a healthy body."

"Thank you."

Having to choose a suitable person was a painful task. It seemed as if the revelation would not base its occurrence on Taiki's likes and dislikes, which made Taiki feel even worse.

"Oh... If I have time, can I come back and see Hien?"

Risai smiled clearly and said, "Of course, anytime."



4

Taiki encountered a fight on his way back from taking a stroll around after he had left the tenba.

Not a small amount of people had gathered at a place in front of him, and Taiki was wondering what was going on when he heard the nyosen whispering. He heard the word "fight" and anxiously grabbed onto the lower part of Youka's dress.

Regardless of what kind of creature was involved, any sort of violence frightened Taiki for the same reason that he was scared of blood. But it wasn't that he was fearful of getting hit. It was the actual act of hitting that he was afraid of, and at the same time, he was terrified of the people who did such things.

"Why is there a commotion?"

It wasn't until they heard the nyosen's voice that the people noticed that Taiki had arrived, whereupon they bowed down.

"Uh... That is..."

The masters of Mt. Hou inherently hate blood and violence, so incidents that cause bloodshed are strictly prohibited here. However, when they do occur, those who caused the trouble are immediately expelled from Mt. Hou.

"Really! How can you people from Tai Kingdom be so careless and hot-blooded!" A nyosen couldn't hold it in any longer and yelled at them as she approached the crowd.

Because every kingdom had different local customs and practices, they all also had their own national character. The people of Tai Kingdom were famous for their drive to outdo others. Originally, every kingdom's characteristics would also flow into their kirin, but exceptions do occur.

"Stop! Where do you think you are?"

When the crowd of spectators heard the nyosen, they opened up a path.

In the middle of the gathering stood two men. One of them was a big fellow, built like a rock and holding a long sword. By comparison, the other man whose hands were held in fists, looked short, though one could see that he still had a capable figure. The latter of the two men was wearing a sword, but he had not drawn it. Also, any discerning person could tell that this spirited man, though shorter, was superior to the other.

It was this bold man who had attracted Taiki's attention.

His black armor contrasted sharply with his white hair, and the sun had made his complexion dark. He was tall, and his physique and movements were frighteningly agile, giving off the impression that he was a fierce beast.

The nyosen passed through layer after layer of people, intending to put a stop to this fight, not expecting that the fight had already resolved itself. After dodging an attack from the sword, the bare-handed man had knocked the big fellow over with his fist.

The big fellow hit the ground and was not able to get back up. The man looked at him and said, "How dare you draw your sword in the honorable residence of the Mt. Hou Kou! You should be extending our gratitude to the Kou."

The man's movements did not contain even a bit of the arrogance of a winner, and his speech held a modest tone.

After he said these things coldly, he turned and met Taiki's line of sight.

--The man's eyes were crimson, like the color of blood.

Taiki couldn't help but grab Youka's dress tightly. Taiki feared this man from the deepest part of his heart.

As Taiki, who was ready to leave, tugged at Youka, the man slowly made his way over and kneeled to him.

"I didn't think the Mt. Hou Kou would be here as well."

The man's expression softened greatly, very much warming Taiki's first impression of him. People came to greet Taiki, so he had no choice but to stand there, tightening his grip on Youka's dress.

"I'm extremely sorry to have done such disrespectful things here. I must ask the Kou of Mt. Hou to please forgive me."

Taiki wasn't able to reply, so Youka spoke to the man for him.

"Please refrain from causing any more trouble on Mt. Hou."

"I really am very sorry!"

Youka had been holding Taiki's hand and moved it in order to soothe Taiki. She then pat his back lightly and pushed him forward slowly.

"It's okay now. There's no more fighting. Luckily, no one was seriously hurt."

It seemed as though Youka was telling this to Taiki, so he could only nod. Taiki was truly unable to say anything because the man in front of him really scared him.

The man kneeling on the ground looked like he was older than Risai. His hair had been tied up in the back very simply, and its silver color seemed to radiate a slight blue sheen. Perhaps it was because of this that he looked older. He had handsome features, and the corners of his eyes revealed a shrewdness. The line of sight that he had directed over to Taiki was as sharp as an arrow.

The man smiled and said, "It looks like I've really frightened you. I'm extremely sorry."

"Don't be..." Taiki finally spoke. "I was just a little shaken... Where are you from?"

"I am from Kouki. I am General Saku of the Tai Kingdom Kingun."

When they heard his name, the people nearby began talking to each other, causing a small commotion. It looked like this man was well-known.

The Kingun consists of three armies that belong exclusively to the ruler. Together with the three armies of the Kou of the capital province, who is appointed by only the kirin, it is called the Rokushi, the Six Armies. Because of the nature of kirin, they aren't able to command the army, so in reality, the ruler directs the army in the place of the kirin. Thus, the Rokushi is also called the Oushi, the Royal Army.

"My name is Sou, and I am called Gyousou."

Taiki was frightened by his direct gaze, but he had to say a few words. Being pulled in two directions by these conflicting conditions, he could only toughen up and speak.

"So... You're a general."

Even though they were both generals, he felt like Gyousou was much more stern than the gentle impression he had gotten from Risai.

The difference between Gyousou and Risai was either because of their personalities, or the fact that their positions were not the same since one was a Kingun General and the other was a General in a provincial army. Taiki really had no clue why.

"Yes. I am humbly most satisfied with my skill with the sword."

Though he said this, Taiki could feel that this person believed in all of his abilities. His body was filled with ambition. Taiki could not stay here any longer.

At this point, he felt that the other person must be wondering if he could be the king. After Taiki was sure nothing unusual had occurred, he pulled on Youka's sleeve lightly.

"...I wish you well until the equinox."

It wasn't easy for Taiki to say this, but it wasn't until he finished that he was able to look away. Gyousou nodded in respect. As to what expression he had on his face, Taiki had no idea.

The group of people surrounding them made another commotion.

"So it wasn't Saku?"

It was not known who said this, but it sounded like he had a renewed hope in becoming the ruler.

5

"Gyousou? Oh, the Oushi's General Saku."

The next day, Taiki asked the Risai, the female general that he had just met, if she knew Gyousou.

She didn't look discouraged at all and gave an enthusiastic welcome to Taiki, who had come to pay Hien a visit. When the nyosen were chatting with Risai's servants, Taiki sat next to Risai and Hien.

"Madam Risai, you're also a general, right? Do you know him?"

Risai shook her head. "I am a general, but I'm a general in a provincial army. Sir Gyousou is a general in the army under the direct control of the ruler. Our social positions are not the same."

It could be said that the difference between a general in a provincial army and a general in the Kingun is very great. A Kingun general may enter the royal palace and speak directly with the ruler. They can also participate in the morning court council and assume a role in government. A general in the Army of the Provincial Kou is simply a person in the military. Thus, if one were to become a Kingun general, there is no doubt that they would be an important subject to the ruler.

"You say that, so is he very famous?"

"Yes. He is considered a very well-known swordsman and receives the genuine respect of his soldiers. I've heard others say that he is direct and tough, but that he is also intelligent and well-mannered." After Risai finished saying this, she looked at Taiki. "Do you have an interest in Sir Gyousou?"

"...Yesterday, I came across a fight..."

Risai nodded. "So I heard. Someone was irritated and purposefully provoked Sir Gyousou. The fault is with the other person, not with Sir Gyousou. Supposedly, that person seriously insulted Sir Gyousou's character. Otherwise, this quarrel would never have occurred."

"So that's how it was..."

Risai looked directly at Taiki and asked, "Is Sir Gyousou the king?"

Taiki quickly shook his head. "No. It's just that he makes me feel scared..."

Since this wasn't what she expected to hear, a look of disappointment appeared on Risai's face. "Oh... So it wasn't Sir Gyousou..."

"I heard people say that yesterday too."

Risai smiled. "He isn't a warm person, but he also isn't terrifying. I think he's a very strong man. There are 12500 soldiers in an army, and to get every one of them to respect him is not an easy task. He has made enemies along the way, but there are far more that admire him. For Sir Gyousou to not be the king, it's a little disheartening."

"Do you also admire Sir Gyousou?"

Risai ran her hands thru Hien's fur. "Yes! Though I've never had the opportunity to actually meet him, I definitely respect him a lot, since I have also lead troops before. Thus, if Sir Gyousou were to become king, I would certainly recognize his authority."

"I had no idea he was such a capable person."

Risai nodded. "If we're talking about swordsmanship, King En ranks first, and second is Sir Gyousou."

"Oh..."

"I think you might be able to find another person comparable to Sir Gyousou, but a person who possesses such a deep public support, and has both a talent for military and administrative leadership and also a high nobility and prestige, is few and far between."

Taiki nodded.

(...But, he didn't prompt any revelation...)

"It is regrettable." This came from the bottom of Risai's heart.

Anyone who had something to do with the military knew that talented people like General Saku of the Kingun were hard to come by. It was an exceptional case that Gyousou was still young when he became a general in the Kingun. It has been said that early on, the people of a rebellion that Gyousou quelled came to respect him greatly in the end.

It's not hard to find a military officer in other kingdoms who is strong or one that is honorable, but to find a person who is both of these things and also whose fame resounds through all the kingdoms, that is extremely rare to come by.

In truth, when she was hurrying along the Reikon Gate road, Risai had heard that Gyousou was among the crowds climbing the mountains, at which point she knew that she was not to ascend to the throne.

Because she was a compassionate general, the people thought of her as a very kind and honorable military officer. She received the attention of the people and their utmost expectations. They believed that she had what it took to be chosen, so she climbed the mountain. However, Risai herself had never thought herself to be the best candidate. She believed that if she really compared herself to others in the world, she would not be able to surpass Gyousou.

"It really is...very regrettable..." mumbled Risai to herself.

Taiki felt bad when he heard this, so he said, "I think Madam Risai would make a great queen..."

When Risai heard this, she laughed. "You compliment me with these words. I thank you."

"I really think so."

"I am honored, but perhaps you believe in people too easily! There are those who will flatter the Kou for the sake of honor and wealth," said Risai, half in jest as she looked at Taiki. Taiki was surprised.

"No way!"

"Yes, these kinds of people are everywhere! There are many among the mountain-climbers who aren't capable of ascending to the throne, so they rely on this opportunity to befriend the Kou or the ruler in order to pave the way for their own future."

"Are there really?"

"It's unfortunate, but there are. For instance, a person like me might hope that after you've descended the mountain and gone to Tai Kingdom, you will promote me into the Oushi."

Taiki held his head askew. "I think...you're not that kind of person."

Risai laughed even more happily. "Kou, you really know how to speak. I am overjoyed by your words."

"Really?"

"Really," laughed Risai as she stood up and lightly brushed off the straw that was on her clothes. "It looks like the nyosen who accompanied you here have also finished their conversation. If you don't mind, please allow me to stroll with you around this area."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

1

"Youka, can I go outside?" asked a restless Taiki, who had only entered Hoto Palace not too long ago.

Youka smiled. "Of course. Did you want to go see Madam Risai?"

"...Is that not good?"

"Of course not. Madam Risai is a good person. She is a general and we believe her to be a trustworthy person."

Obtaining permission, Taiki exited the palace surrounded by the nyosen who had been on the platform.

As the days went by, the nyosen had gotten to know quite a few of the mountain-climbers. First one nyosen, then another would encounter someone that they knew and stop to chat with them. Slowly the number of nyosen walking with Taiki would become smaller and smaller. Even Youka stopped just shortly before they reached Risai's tent to talk with an attendant from some other place. Taiki ran the remainder of the distance.

Currently the number of people who stopped to greet him had lessened, but there were still a lot of people who took the opportunity to befriend and chat with Taiki. Taiki had learned a way to avoid being bothered by idle people: he just had to run as quickly as he could.

"Madam Risai!"

Even before Taiki said anything, Risai had already come out of her tent.

"You've come."

"You knew I was coming?"

"When you're coming, Hien calls out happily."

"Really?"

"Yes, perhaps Hien thinks you're really his master!"

"That can't be."

"We'll never be sure. Youju are not able to speak, otherwise you could ask him." Risai laughed as she lightly patted Hien's neck. "Am I right, Hien?"

The tenba suddenly turned its head and rubbed it against Taiki's chest. Risai smiled wryly and said, "Look, didn't I just say so?"

After they washed Hien and brushed his fur, Taiki and Risai used the remainder of the morning to stroll around. Risai very patiently answered all of Taiki's questions in detail. In addition, if there were any strange things that Taiki was unfamiliar with, she would explain all of them to him without exception.

Risai would also introduce Taiki to her friends. It seemed as though these people had gotten to know Risai after they had climbed the mountain, and they all felt like good people. Walking around with Risai always made Taiki feel an unrestrained happiness.

"Are all the people who come here from Tai Kingdom? Are there no people from other kingdoms?" asked Taiki casually as he and Risai were walking slowly through a vast area surrounded by spring water that gushed from the bottom of a crag.

Risai couldn't help but lightly chuckle. "Of course. The ruler of Tai Kingdom is decided from the people of Tai Kingdom."

"Is that so?"

"Could it be that you didn't know?" Risai had a slight surprised look on her face.

"I wasn't brought back to live on Mt. Hou until recently, so there are a lot of things I don't know."

Risai nodded in understanding. "I wasn't aware. How rude of me. It is a rule that says the ruler of a kingdom must be from that kingdom."

"So all these people here, they're all from Tai Kingdom?"

"Well it's not limited to just that. It just requires that one is born in Tai Kingdom."

"Oh..."

Risai held Taiki's hand as they walked for a bit when he suddenly stopped.

"Madam Risai, look at the really beautiful beast over there."

Risai turned to look where Taiki was looking and nodded.

"Yes, that's a sugu. They are very beautiful."

This creature looked a lot like a tiger. It had a long tail and an incredible multi-colored radiance. Compared to the gentle impression the tenba gave people, the strength it displayed was much fiercer by far.

"The sugu makes the best kiju. It can cross a kingdom in one day."

"How powerful!"

The nyosen had said before that it took an entire month's time for a horse to completely cross a kingdom, which gave him an idea of how considerably big the land was.

"Yes, sugu are extremely obedient to their masters and are also very smart. You will not be able to find a beast braver on the battlefields than this one." Risai looked admiringly at the sugu and walked slowly towards it. "I would very much like to have a sugu."

"You want a sugu? Then what about Hien?"

"Of course I would like one. Hien is cute and docile, but his personality is too gentle to bring onto a battlefield. I am a military commander, so I must consider matters of war first and foremost."

"I see..."

"I'm hoping that I'll encounter a sugu on my way back from Mt. Hou."

"If you run into one, will you catch it and take it back with you?"

Risai laughed. "That's my plan. Before I came, of course I very much anticipated meeting you, but I also looked forward to a chance to capture and take back a sugu."

"Oh..."

"If I dared to spend money, I could probably buy a sugu to take home, but it would be very embarrassing to buy a youju. No, I should actually say that for something like a kiju, I would like to rely on my own strength to tame it."

"I see."

Risai smiled as she nodded, and then called out to the tent next to which the sugu was tied up, "Forgive me for inquiring, but is the master of this sugu available?"

"If you're asking about Keito, he is my mount."

They suddenly heard a voice from behind them. Risai looked surprised as her reflexes put her into a defensive stance.

"Sir Gyousou..."

It was that man. Today, he wasn't wearing that armor from before, but his sword was still at his waist. It had been hard to forget his ice-like hair and his eyes that were like rubies.

After Risai looked at Taiki and Gyousou, she stood up straight. "This is the first time we have met. I am--"

"You are Madam Risai of the Jou Provincial Army, are you not?" smile Gyousou. Risai looked pleased.

"Why do you...?"

"General, your name is known far and wide. There are few that do not know of you."

"Just as I thought!" Taiki blurted out. Risai and Gyousou both turned to look at him. "Ah... Excuse me."

Gyousou was very interested in Taiki's response. "As you thought?"

"It's like this... I had previously said to Madam Risai that she was a very exceptional general. It seems as if I'm not the only one who thinks so..."

Risai's face reddened a little bit as she turned to Gyousou. "The Kou speaks too highly of me."

"Not at all," said Gyousou with a smile.

"Kou, you have very good insight. It's just as you said. The people exalted when Madam Risai was promoted into the Jou Provincial Army."

"Please don't listen to him, Kou."

Risai became shy, which was unusual for her, so it made her feel awkward.

Gyousou noticed her slight distress and could not hold in a smile. Taiki stood on the side and, seeing Gyousou's smile, realized that he wasn't the scary person that he had originally thought him to be.

2

"That's right. I don't know if it was Madam Risai or the Kou that had a question about Keito." Gyousou looked at Taiki and Risai.

"The Kou said that he would like to get a good look at him."

"If it is the Kou, then I do not think Keito will have any objections." Gyousou showed them to the sugu.

Observing it from so closely, Taiki discovered that its eyes left a deeper impression than its appearance. He was stunned by the complicated and beautiful colors in it.

"Might I ask...if Sir Gyousou captured this sugu with his own hands?"

"Yes, because I don't like to buy kiju."

"Why is that? Isn't capturing youju really dangerous?"

Suddenly, Gyousou raised the corners of his lips. Taiki flinched at seeing this intense sort of smile, and it scared him.

"These youju originally come from the wild and become kiju when people rein in and restrain them. For us to become their masters, if we didn't risk our lives as payment to them, wouldn't that be unfair to them?"

"Oh...yeah..."

Gyousou stroked Keito fondly, as the frightening smile that was previously on his face disappeared.

"I captured him with my own hands, and trained him myself. This sugu and my sword are both my treasures."

Risai was very astonished and asked, "You trained Keito on your own?"

"Essentially. The trainer had not done a good job. He does not listen to anyone but me," said Gyousou as he smiled. He leaned his head and looked at Taiki. "Normally, people say that doing this is not smart, because a dangerous accident could happen in a second."

"Oh..."

"Oh, that's right." Risai looked at Gyousou. "Is Sir Gyousou's sword the one bestowed upon you by the previous King Tai?"

"Yes."

"It must be an exceptionally fine sword."

"It is most definitely a very sharp blade."

The sword is a weapon, not a simple accessory. When this thought entered Taiki's head, he couldn't help but quiver with fright.

Since Gyousou was a military man, fierce combat was unavoidable for him. He probably received this sword through some great military achievement, and carried it to do battle with.

"So what was the achievement?"

In response to Taiki's question, Gyousou shook his head.

"It wasn't because of some great feat. Once, the late king had asked King En to grant me a duel."

"Did you win?"

"I lost," laughed Gyousou happily. "We fought three times, and I only won once. The late king was very pleased with my one victory, so he bestowed this sword upon me. I do not use this sword to fight with, so it really is a treasure."

"King En is truly very powerful."

"He was too much for me, but I tried my best." At this, that frightening expression reappeared on Gyousou's face. "Had I also lived five-hundred years, I believe that King En would not be a match for me."

This was Gyousou's utmost confidence in himself.

If he hadn't said it with such a serious tone, it might not have scared Taiki. It was just this expression that appeared every now and then that really frightened him.

"I would also very much like to have a sugu..."

Risai looked at Keito. Gyousou quickly replied, "I know a good place to look for them. Why don't I take you there?" "Really?"

"I have almost completed everything here that I came to do. I was thinking that perhaps I could find another sugu before the next Ankou Day."

"You already have Keito. You wanted another one?"

"If I could get another sugu, then Keito could rest more. Three might be too many, but I think two is a perfect number."

"I understand your meaning. It's just that...are you really willing to let others know where to find them?"

"Why not? If a person wants one, they should catch one for themselves."

"Aren't you afraid that other people will exhaust the place of sugu?"

Gyousou laughed lightly. "What is there to be afraid of? Those who want to become master to a sugu are required to have many skills."

After they left Gyousou, Taiki let out a big sigh, but he knew that he was still very anxious.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing..."

Risai could see Taiki's mood in his face.

"Kou, are you still afraid of Sir Gyousou?"

"Madam Risai, it seems like you don't feel it at all."

"I think that he is able to strike fear into the hearts of all the enemies who face him... What I mean is, he truly makes other people feel a little nervous."

"So that's it..."

"He has a frightful ambition. You see a friendly dog and relax, but then you realize that it's really a wolf, and so you're paralyzed with fear. Do you know that feeling?"

This had perfectly described his emotions.

"I know exactly what you're saying."

Risai murmured, "It is just as the rumors said. He has an extraordinary ambition... It's too bad he's not the king."

"Really?" Taiki was truly afraid of Gyousou.

Risai nodded. "A ruler isn't simply a good person. A ruler who is too compassionate will lead his kingdom astray, and one who is too modest will bring his kingdom to ruin... I sincerely believed that Sir Gyousou was the one."

"Madam Risai, do you really mean that?"

Risai looked at Taiki, whose head was raised toward her, and smiled. "After meeting Sir Gyousou, I am a little embarrassed that I came to climb the mountain. --Sir Gyousou is really the strongest of the strong."

3

"It doesn't look like there's a ruler among those who have climbed the mountain."

When Youka said this, a month and a half had already passed since the summer solstice.

It was late at night with the moon high in the sky, and the insects chirped continuously.

"Then...it should be okay if we don't go to Hoto Palace tomorrow, right?"

Youka nodded as she tidied up the bed.

Sanshi silently helped Taiki change clothes.

"I suppose we could just close the gates of the outer palace. That way, we can let everyone know that they should stop hoping."

"And then what?"

"And then we let things happen. If you want to go outside and play, you might as well."

"Really?"

"Yes, since there'll be people to help us watch out for you. You're probably going to look for Sir Gyousou and Madam Risai, right? As long as those two are there, then we don't need to worry. Also, Sanshi will be by your side."

After that day when he talked to Gyousou, Taiki always stopped by to visit him.

Ordinarily, he would first pay a visit to Risai, and then after he played with Hien, he would visit Gyousou. Eventually, it became an unexpected sort of routine.

Occasionally, Gyousou still made Taiki's heart jump, but after a while, he got used to that too. There were normally

very few men on Mt. Hou, so after Taiki became familiar with Gyousou, if he didn't visit him, he would feel as if something was missing.

"Then..." Taiki looked up at Youka. "Tomorrow Madam Risai and Sir Gyousou are going out to the Yellow Sea to look for sugu."

Youka raised her eyebrows. "And?"

"...And I would like to go with them... I can't go, can I?"

When Risai invited Taiki, he had told her that the nyosen might not allow him to go.

Youka exchanged glances with Teiei, who was standing in the corner of the room, and then sighed and said, "All right, since you don't usually ask us for anything. Just please do your best to be careful. Don't get hurt or we'll be very worried."

A wide grin spread across Taiki's face. "Okay!"

The darkness was still draped over the sky though daybreak was approaching. Taiki rushed over from Hoto Palace to Risai's tent without stopping.

The surroundings were so hazy that human shapes were hard to make out, but the camp area had been illuminated by torches.

"Madam Risai!"

"Kou."

Taiki saw that Gyousou had already put on his armor and was standing with Keito, waiting for him to arrive. Risai was just placing a saddle onto Hien's back, and it was the first time that Taiki had seen her in armor. She turned her head and looked at the nyosen following Taiki and nodded.

"Are we ready to set off?"

Risai smiled. "Almost."

"Am I riding with you on Hien?"

"That's right."

Teiei, who had chased behind Taiki, bowed deeply. "There are none who can replace Taiki's person, so Madam Risai and Sir Gyousou, I please ask that you must take care of him, no matter what."

Risai and Gyousou returned the bow.

"We earnestly believe in both of your abilities, so the danger shouldn't be too great that Taiki is with you. However, please be sure that you return him before noon."

"Certainly."

Teiei nodded, and then noticed that only a tenba and a sugu were ready with saddles.

"Are you not bringing any attendants with you?"

"If we bring attendants on horses, I'm afraid that we would not be able to make it back by noon," said Risai difficultly. Teiei creased her brow.

The Yellow Sea is quite a dangerous place, and though it protects the Five Mountains, countless numbers of youma reside there. Youju will obediently listen to their masters as soon as they are subdued, but they are originally born wild, so they are dangerous and will attack people.

Besides youma and youju, there are countless other hazards hidden in the Yellow Sea, such as quicksand, swamps full of poisonous vapors, boulders falling off the mountain, and the like.

"Can the both of you guarantee that you will bring the Kou back without the slightest injury?"

Risai nodded her head solidly. "We will definitely make sure he does not get injured in the least."

"It's too bad we can't come with you. The nyosen need the permission of Genkun to leave the Five Mountains. I know it's very dangerous there, so please consider the Kou's safety first while you're hunting. He must not come into contact with blood. This I ask of you."

"Yes... Of course." A labored expression floated onto Risai's face. Teiei ignored it and continued speaking.

"If you really must kill a youma, one of you please take the Kou away first...even if it means abandoning the other person."

"Teiei..." Afraid that Teiei would keep talking, Taiki gently tugged at the bottom of Teiei's dress.

"We are not setting off on a sightseeing excursion," said Gyousou with a stern look upon his face. "The main purpose of this trip to the edge of the Yellow Sea is to hunt for youju. Thus, I cannot guarantee you that it won't be dangerous. However, we are most confident that we can protect the Kou, so that is why we have invited him to come with us. For you to give us these instructions again and again, I must say that the nyosen of Mt. Hou are being a bit too discourteous."

Teiei looked unwaveringly at Gyousou. "...You are really full of self-confidence... I suppose that it would be useless to say anymore..."

Gyousou fearless looked back at Teiei, the unyielding glimmer in his eyes becoming more intense. "I must please ask the nyosen not to worry. The Kou is the Kirin of our Tai Kingdom. Protecting the safety of the Kou is the absolute responsibility of the people of Tai Kingdom. Can the nyosen accept what I have said?"

The two looked at each other for a moment, until Teiei looked away briefly.

"What you've said does make sense... Then that is all I ask of you."

"Of course."

When Teiei turned to make her way back to the palace, Gyousou grasped his sugu's reins and said, "The daylight is



almost here. We should head out, Madam Risai."

4

Though the tenba was galloping very quickly, riding upon it didn't feel shaky.

Whether it was leaping across the crags, running upon flat land, or passing through the dense forests, it completely didn't affect those who rode upon it. This steady feeling was not at all like riding on the back of an animal. Sitting on top, Taiki felt both surprised and blissful.

It seemed as if the tenba had exceptional eyesight in the dark. Even if it was going through areas where rocks and trees were blocking the moonlight, it didn't slow down at all.

"...What does it feel like?" asked Risai, who was holding Taiki with her arms as she clutched the reins with her hands. Taiki turned back to look at her.

"It's a lot like a kirin."

Risai showed a little surprise. "You've ridden a kirin before?"

"Yes... Is that strange?"

Risai smiled wryly. "Now that is quite a rare experience. --Also, how could Hien compare to a kirin? I feel rather embarrassed."

"Really?"

"Yes. Of course, since you are a kirin, you may not think that riding a kirin is anything special. But for someone like me, I wouldn't dare to dream of riding one."

"Oh..."

Taiki had never thought about that before. Certainly, when he recalled riding upon Keiki, he felt a little bit bewildered, but not that it was anything terribly special.

"But really, I would never have dreamed that I would actually have the opportunity to ride upon the same saddle with you."

After Taiki looked up and saw Risai smiling, he tilted his head, which meant that he didn't object to what she had said.

Taiki had wanted to ask Gyousou for his opinion, but when he turned to look at Gyousou, who was riding Keito next to them, he only saw Gyousou's profile as he looked ahead with a stern expression on his face. Taiki supposed that Gyousou hadn't heard the conversation between himself and Risai.

That frightening feeling emanated from Gyousou once again, and he looked like he was still irritated with what Teiei had said before.

Taiki had originally been cheerfully riding on the tenba, but that feeling rapidly disappeared.

He felt as if it had all been his fault.

Hien and Keito entered into a deep part of the Yellow Sea, gracefully passing through the rocky crags, and arrived at a place south of the Five Mountains--the base of Mt. Kou.

Gyousou, who had been riding in front, stopped Keito upon a hill that was connected to a savage-looking rock which was protruding upward, and came down off the saddle. At this time, the moon could still be seen in the sky.

"Sir Gyousou, is this the place?" asked Risai, after she had stopped Hien. Gyousou nodded gravely.

Risai lifted Taiki down off the saddle. He looked at the ambitious Gyousou from the side.

"Uh... Sir Gyousou..."

"Yes?" Gyousou's tone was impatient. He unloaded the packs that had been tied to the saddle, not bothering to look back at Taiki.

With Gyousou's back towards him, Taiki lowered his head. "Just then...the nyosen were a little disrespectful."

Gyousou stopped what he was doing and sighed. His air of determination subsided as well.

"...You do not need to apologize to me."

"No... Actually...I am very sorry, Sir Gyousou, and Madam Risai too."

Risai had found a suitable place in a corner surrounded by crags to prepare a fire. When she heard Taiki say this, she couldn't help but laugh a little.

"You need not think about it. I know that it's very normal for the nyosen to worry."

"No!" Taiki looked at the two of them.

"I...am an ailing kirin."

The two looked at Taiki, making him feel embarrassed, so his face turned red.

"That's just a metaphor..." Taiki tried his best to find a suitable way to describe it. "Teiei wasn't doubting the abilities of Madam Risai and Sir Gyousou. It's because I can't quite take care of myself, so that's why she was so anxious."

Risai smiled warmly. "Kou, in this world, you are someone whom no one can replace. You shouldn't sell yourself short."

Taiki shook his head. "No! The nyosen worry so much because I can't do any of the things a kirin is supposed to be able to do! That's what I think it probably is... I...don't even have any shirei."

Gyousou and Risai both opened their eyes widely, and then exchanged glances with each other.

Since kirin cannot stand blood, they have no way of holding a weapon and fighting with others, even if their opponent is a youma or a youju.

Thus, the ones that are able to help protect the kirin are his shirei. It is common knowledge that a kirin possesses a countless number of shirei. If a kirin does not have any shirei, that means that he has no way of protecting himself.

"And it's not just that. I cannot transform either."

After hearing this, Gyousou and Risai were even more shocked.

"I should have a lot of shirei and depend on those shirei to protect myself, but I don't have even one. If we have to run away, I should be able to run away by changing into kirin form, but I don't know how to transform."

Telling other people about how useless he was made him feel ashamed. Taiki couldn't help but shrink down his body a little bit.

"That's why the nyosen are so extremely worried about me. They've thought up all sorts of methods to try to cure me, and even specifically asked the Taiho of Kei Kingdom to come help me.."

When he thought about how worthless he was, and how that made everyone around him worry about him and concentrate their care upon him, Taiki had no choice but to feel sad.

Gyousou gently patted Taiki's head with his big hand.

Taiki looked up and saw only a warm expression gazing in his direction. Though it was still the Gyousou who sometimes frightened people, he occasionally had a kinder side to him.

"We were not planning on using any shirei, so please don't worry."

"At least...I still have a nyokai."

Gyousou smiled. "That is reassuring."

Gyousou's hand, which was bigger by far than Keiki's hand, stroked Taiki's head.

"Yes..."

5

"What kind of bait are we going to use?" asked Taiki to Risai as she was setting a trap.

"A gem. Sugu are especially fond of agate."

Risai took out a piece of agate about the same size as a chicken's egg for Taiki to look at.

"Wow... It's so big... The sugu will really eat it?"

Risai smiled. "It's just like a cat and the silvervine."

"I see..."

Risai put the piece of agate in Taiki's hand, turned to Gyousou and said, "I'm going to lay out some bait to lure them over here."

Risai jumped onto her tenba.

"Lure?"

"The shattered pieces of agate. Sir Gyousou, I leave the Kou in your care."

"I understand."

After taking a giant leap, Hien flew outward. At this time, the eastern sky had slowly grown whiter.

The middle of the night was the most suitable for hunting, because very few youju wandered around in when the sun was high in the sky. Currently, there was still a stretch of time before it was light out. This wasn't the best opportunity to hunt, but taking into consideration Taiki's safety, Gyousou and Risai chose this period of time.

After Gyousou tied a rope onto a stake that had been driven into the ground, he lightly patted his hands, stood up, and walked towards Keito who was laying on the rocks by the fire.

"Kou, would you like to rest?"

"Yes."

Gyousou leaned on Keito and motioned for Taiki to come beside him, whereupon Taiki obediently walked over and sat next to him.

"Do you think we'll be able to catch one?"

"We'll have to see how lucky we are."

"Did you catch Keito here?"

Gyousou nodded. "In all the Ankou Days that I passed through, I think it was my sixth attempt that I caught him."

"It must be pretty hard then?"

"To be honest, it's a lot of trouble just to set all those traps."

Since he didn't know how the complex apparatus formed by the chains and ropes would be operated, Taiki sunk into his fertile imagination almost immediately.

"Are you scared of me?"

Faced with such a sudden question, Taiki lifted his head and looked surprisingly at Gyousou.

"No..."

"Sometimes I feel that when you look at me, it seems as if you want to get far away from me. Or is it perhaps you smell something horrible on me, and you're afraid that it's contagious?"

"It's not like that!"

"Or are kirin afraid to look at me?" Gyousou revealed a sliver of a bitter smile. "Kirin are very compassionate creatures. It looks like I have been spared compassion, hasn't it?"

"Not at all..."

"I am a warrior. I cannot be compassionate. That is unavoidable... Kou, if you recognize anything in which I am

lacking, I hope that you can tell me, because I would like to know in what area I have not done well."

Gyousou's tone was still and his voice was so light that it felt like it dissolved into the night. Taiki was at a loss.

"...I think perhaps Sir Gyousou has misunderstood."

Gyousou looked inquiringly at Taiki.

"Or perhaps, it is the color of your eyes... It reminds me of blood, and that frightens me a little..."

"I appreciate your concern for me, but it is not necessary to be too kind to me."

Taiki calmly gathered up the courage to look back at Gyousou and said, "...I really don't know how to explain it."

"You can say anything. Do not worry about me."

"I...I've always considered my personality to be weak. The nyosen often tell me that I lack ambition, that I should have more confidence in myself. I don't know why I'm like this."

Gyousou looked at Taiki with a deep silence.

"Sir Gyousou, you're not the same way. You're full of self-confidence. Truthfully, I'm not sure if I would describe it as ambitious, but I think the sense that you give people is that you are driven, especially...when that determination sometimes rises up very intensely. --Do you understand what I'm talking about?"

Gyousou nodded.

"So that's why I get a little scared. It's a little bit different than envy."

Taiki looked at the fire next to Keito.

"Fire...is warm and bright, but at the same time, it's strong and scary, right? So that's why I'm afraid... I think that's probably how I feel about you."

Even Taiki himself didn't understand why he felt this fear.

"But I'm not down on myself because of this. I don't think it's because of any sort of violence that I feel scared. It doesn't feel quite the same. And it isn't like the fear I feel when I see blood. That feels different too..."

No matter how he said it, he just couldn't find a way to express what it was that he was feeling. The more he thought about it, the more flustered Taiki would get, and suddenly, he felt like crying.

"It's not quite an unpleasant feeling. A big fire is frightening, but it's also beautiful and amazing. That's what I've been trying to say. I feel like you're very great, but at the same time, I'm a little scared of you."

He put his hands to his face.

"There's no need to cry."

"I'm sorry..."

"It's my fault for asking such a strange question."

"Not at all..."

Gyousou laughed warmly and gently stroked Taiki's hair. "You are a good child."

"No... That's..."

"You are both honest and kind. I believe Tai Kingdom will definitely get better."

"Do you really think so?"

Gyousou nodded. He hugged Taiki's shoulders with the arm he was using to stroke Taiki's head as he looked into the fire.

Afterwards, neither of them said anything. Previously leaning on Keito, Taiki shifted toward Gyousou's body and sunk into the silence.

## CHAPTER NINE

1

"Sir Gyousou!"

Taiki saw the ashes from a torch flying around and its light growing closer to where he was sitting. It was Risai returning on Hien's back. A sliver of a white light had just begun revealing itself in the sky to the east.

"Sir Gyousou, I've discovered a suspicious cavern."

"Oh?" Gyousou stood up.

"It's near a swamp not too far from here. I saw tracks coming out of it, but I didn't know if they were those of a sugu or not."

"Is it its lair?"

"Perhaps."

"We should go take a look."

Risai lifted Taiki onto Hien as she climbed on as well, and Gyousou mounted Keito.

The cavern was an opening in the crags at the edge of a swamp where a mixture of murky water and mud had accumulated. The stretch of land between the swamp and the cave was overgrown with weeds in such a way that it was as if there was a path through it.

Hien and Keito tried to get closer to the cavern. By means of the light from the torches, they saw tracks leading into the cave.

Gyousou stopped Keito. Comparing the prints that Keito had just made, he discovered that the tracks looked like they were left by a creature bigger than a sugu.

"It may not be a sugu... But then, what is it?"

Risai got off of Hien and looked into the mouth of the cave.

An arrangement of giant rocks formed the cave opening, which was about as tall as Risai. They called it a cavern, but it could also be described as a big crevice forming a tunnel underneath a mass of connected crags.

Not too far in, the tunnel turned, so the deepest part of the cave could not be seen.

"I'd gone into it a little bit before to survey it. It looks like it goes very deep. Should we go inside?"

"Perhaps we might run into a dragon."

"That reminds me. The Dragon Palace is at the bottom of the Yellow Sea."

Gyousou investigated the inside of the cave once again.

"Anyway, that's what they say..."

"This cavern looks a bit too small to be one that went all the way to the bottom of the Yellow Sea."

"...Well then, what should we do?" Risai was a little uncertain.

"Why don't we go in for a look?" said Gyousou with his back to the others, and then turned around to look at Taiki.

"What do you think?"

"Ah... I don't know."

"Then let's go inside and look around."

Risai walked into the cavern. "I'll walk in front. Sir Gyousou, please watch over the Kou."

"All right."

Taiki had some reservations and looked up at Gyousou. "Um..."

"Scared?"

He was originally going to shake his head, but then Taiki decided to speak honestly. "A little..."

"What's wrong?" Risai had already walked to the turn.

"We're going in now. Kou, you must not leave my side."

"Yes..."

It seemed as if the tunnel passed under the mountainous crags. The path extended slowly downward, twisting and turning, as if it had no end. Though there was no wind, their flame wavered, which meant that there was air circulation. Though this path turned so much that it was hard to travel, there were no branches to distract them.

"It's fairly long..." Gyousou's voice echoed throughout the inside of the cave. Risai, who was in the front, stopped walking.

"There's no more road in front of us."

Looking in Risai's direction, there seemed to be a small open area beyond her. Except, the ground of the open area was lower than the path of the subterranean tunnel they had walked through. The difference in the elevation of the two was almost Taiki's height.

Risai jumped down and looked around this space, uneven because it was piled with rocks.

"Strange... There's nothing here."

"That shouldn't be. There's a bad smell inside this cave."

Taiki crinkled his eyebrows. A stench permeated the air just as Gyousou said this.

The smell wasn't so bad that it disgusted people. It was just enough to be bothersome.

In this rocky area, Risai constantly stepped up and down to get through it. At the next moment, Taiki saw her squatting next to a sloped, prominently smooth rock. After her figure moved farther and farther away, Taiki began to feel a strong anxiety.

"Ah! There's another tunnel over here that goes further down."

"Where?" Gyousou picked Taiki up and jumped down into the open area. He stood on a piece of rock and looked where Risai was pointing.

--It was a dark cave.

"It looks like...there's something inside." Taiki murmured to himself.

"Hm?" Both Gyousou and Risai looked over at Taiki. He felt a chill running up his body from the soles of his feet. His heartbeat quickened and he became very distressed.

"...Let's go back... Over there... It's not safe."

"What's wrong?"

Taiki grabbed Gyousou's hand and reached out with his other toward Risai.

"I don't like that place."

Risai and Gyousou exchanged looks. Risai smiled and placed her hand at the edge of the cave.

"I just want to make sure whether anything is inside the cave."

"No! No, don't go over there!" Taiki was about to go forward and stop Risai, but after he took only one step, something suddenly appeared on the rocks and blocked him from going any further.

"You can't go over there!"

"Sanshi!"

The abrupt appearance of the nin'you caused Gyousou to immediately clutch the hilt of his sword, preparing to draw it. But then, Taiki let go of his hand and hugged the nin'you in front of him, at which point he realized that this nin'you was the nyokai that Taiki had mentioned before.

Risai was also very surprised, widening her eyes at the emergence of the white nin'you. Her hand was still placed

upon the side of the cave as she turned the upper portion of her body toward Taiki, and just then, something suddenly took a hold of her hand.

Risai didn't even have time to react. She only heard the child next to Gyousou cry out.

"...Risai!"

Unable to hide the look of shock on her face, Risai's body was pulled into the cave. They saw her struggling legs just as they turned to look, and before they knew it, she was gone.

"...Risai!!!"

As if in response to Taiki's desperate cries, a scream came from deep inside the cave.

2

Gyousou rushed toward the cave into which Risai had been swallowed up.

The dark tunnel extended downward, as if it had no end.

"Sir Gyousou!"

"Sanshi, please take the Kou away from here and ride Keito back to Mt. Hou!"

Sanshi nodded. However, Taiki had already run to Gyousou's side.

"Taiki, you cannot go!" Sanshi leapt forward and held onto the child.

"But, Madam Risai, she..."

Gyousou's glare stopped Taiki who had been pointing at the cave. "Entrust the matter of saving Risai to me. You must leave here quickly!"

"I can't!"

Before Gyousou could even answer him, Taiki had already shaken off Sanshi's embrace and jumped toward the cave.

"Taiki!"

Taiki tumbled his way toward the cave while throwing off Sanshi's outreaching hands. Not caring about anything, he jumped into it.

--No matter what, I can't leave Gyousou to save Risai all by himself!

The cave was quite deep. After she looked around, Sanshi hurried to block Taiki's way.

"...Taiki!"

"No! I'm not going!"

Sanshi couldn't help but hold back the hand that she was going to use to grab onto Taiki's arm. For some reason, she just wasn't able to go against Taiki's wishes.

--Why is this?

Suddenly, Sanshi forgot where she was and looked at her own hands, lost in thought.

Taiki was Sanshi's master, and right now, the most important thing was to make Taiki's safety her first consideration. She had to take Taiki away from this dangerous place as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, she didn't know what kind of dangerous creature this was. Actually, she didn't have to pay attention to Taiki's refusal. She could be very forceful if it was to keep Taiki safe.

At this thought, she grabbed Taiki's hand, who unexpectedly shook her off easily. Not to mention, she could not help but pull her hand back.

--Why?

Taiki did not have the time to acknowledge Sanshi's feelings now.

The end of the tunnel was also a wide area, filled with stalactites. The torch that Gyousou had brought was the only source of light inside of the cave, a weak fire that made it very hard for them to estimate the depth of the cavern with any certainty.

Taiki saw the silhouette of Gyousou in front of him with his sword drawn. Laying not far from his feet was Risai.

What frightened him, what had almost swallowed up Risai's body, was a giant dark shadow!

The shadow appeared to take shape. One end of it changed into the shape of a sickle and swung stiffly towards Risai!

"Toutetsu!" Sanshi cried out.

--How could this be?

Sanshi looked unwaveringly at the youma. No, perhaps it should not be called a youma. Its power was far beyond that of any ordinary person, and very few had ever seen it before. It was essentially a monster of legend.

Sanshi was no match for it. Is there anything in this world that can face the toutetsu without drawing themselves back?

Risai raised her head. "Kou, run away!"

"I can't!"

Gyousou pointed at Taiki. "The Kingdom of Tai needs you! You must not die here!"

"I don't want to be the only one to leave. We should all go together!"

A scream rang out.

The toutetsu targeted Risai with a violent force, and then followed it by turning to Gyousou and attacking him.

Gyousou flew to the ground, the toutetsu's attack roaring above his head. It then raised its claw even higher.

--I have to think of a way to stop that frightening weapon!

(How can I do it?)

--The Sword Seal.

"Rin, Byou, Tou, Sha, Kai, Jin, Retsu, Zen, Kyou!"

(I hope I can stop it.)

The black shadow suddenly stopped moving.

(And then...what do I do?)

Koushi. --Except Taiki was shaking so much that he was not able to perform it.

One part of the shadow turned toward him. In the light of the torch, Taiki could see a pair of eyes close to the ground.

Taiki made eye contact with the toutetsu.

"Use this opportunity and go quickly..."

Taiki looked back at the pair of pupils without the least bit of fear, except he didn't know how much longer he could keep this up.

"Sanshi, save Madame Risai!"

"Taiki..."

"Get Madame Risai out of there quickly!"

--There it was again! Sanshi ground her teeth.

There was no way she could disobey Taiki's words. Sanshi hurried to the collapsed Risai. She lifted the body that was lying in a puddle of blood and returned to Taiki's side. She glanced briefly at Taiki and sprinted toward the entrance of the cave.

"Sir Gyousou, you should also take this chance to leave here!"

The fallen Gyousou was outside of Taiki's scope of vision, and Taiki did not have the time to consider if he had actually been hurt.

He could not lose to this pair of blood-like eyes.

"Please..."

A reply came back in a deep voice. "That is not possible."

At this time, Taiki no longer had the extra energy to ask Gyousou to go.

For the first time, he understood that a person's eyes gave them such great leverage. One was the pressure he could put on his opponent; another was the force he could send back.

The struggle between the two filled the inside of the cave. It was as if time had stopped and left everything motionless.



3

(Sweat...)

That pair of eyes still stared at Taiki. Taiki was entirely unaware of how much time had passed. He felt the sweat on his forehead drip down along the bridge of his nose. All he could do was softly breathe in and breathe out.

(Forehead...)

He didn't know when it started, but the area between his eyebrows hurt. It felt like something hot and solid had been buried there. The sweat was actually falling from the spot on his face that hurt.

(My eyes...)

Taiki's sight had already become blurry. Taiki relied completely on feeling the pressure that the toutetsu put on him

in order to determine the toutetsu's position and to hold its line of sight tightly. Except, he had almost lost the sense that allowed him to find the direction that the force came from.

(Time...)

Just how much time had passed?

In his subconscious, Taiki had been concerned about the passage of time since a short while ago.

(I don't know...how much longer...)

Why he cared so much about time, he didn't know himself.

Suddenly, he felt resistance. The strength of the resistance became greater and greater, and Taiki opened his eyes wide. It was as if he had suddenly understood something.

Just in that moment of comprehension, his forehead felt like it was beginning to crack. Even the air that he breathed in was like a burn that went from deep in the bridge of his nose to his throat.

The toutetsu's line of sight began to waver, and its endurance suddenly doubled. There was no easy way for Taiki to continue challenging the power of his opponent. It was as if the time that caused a person to be scared had arrived.

--The seiki turned into shiki.

"Sir Gyousou..." He didn't know if Gyousou was still there; if he was, where would he be?

"You'd better go quickly..." Taiki felt that he could not keep this up anymore.

Taiki heard a still voice come from behind him. "I am very sorry... I can no longer walk."

The little kirin widened his eyes. His breathing became erratic.

--This was the moment it had turned to shiki.

"I am wounded. I cannot move--I must ask you to save me."

In the instant it appeared that his determination was wilting, it was revived.

The two strengths were evenly matched; the situation became more precarious than before. Then and there, they sunk into a deadlock.

(Sweat...)

It fell from his forehead.

(I don't know...if there are any other ways?)

Taiki felt that Gyousou was nearby. He had not moved, nor did he once take his eyes off of Taiki.

(I can only...subdue it.)

Gyousou could not move, but Taiki was even less able to move.

(Submit...)

Taiki began to mumble.

(Shirei, submit...)

Taiki sensed the dark shadow suddenly move. The pressure that came from the shadow waned very slowly. For the first time, he felt the slightest bit of ease.

(Shirei, submit!)

His opponent's strength became even weaker.

He could blink his eyes without much effort. His vision, originally blurred by sweat, had become clear. Taiki saw the dark shadow with a dangerous weapon raised up high and completely stationary.

His two eyes sent out an intense force, and the dark shadow began to change shape.

First, it trembled and withered, slowly changing into a giant spirit that flooded the cavern.

Taiki was not scared at all. He only felt like a heavy burden had been lifted off of him. His limbs were originally like they were made of hard metal, but they had finally recovered their faculties.

"Submit..."

The dark shadow shrank smaller and smaller, slowly changing into the shape of a big cow. The next second, it became a tiger. Then it changed into a great eagle. And then again it turned into a large snake. Countless changes--it proved that the dark shadow itself possessed an extraordinary power. Its last transformation was to that of a small dog that sat in front of Taiki.

"...Shirei, submit..." Taiki pointed toward the ceiling of the cave and received the Will of the Heavens.

In that instant, the power that was emanating from his line of sight suddenly disappeared. He lost the power to resist, and something went straight through him. From the hand that had accepted the Will of the Heavens came a great force that shattered all the restraints in his body.

"Subdue the monster! A union between the light and the dark!"

From his palm came a sound like a flood that pounded at his mind.

GOU. Gou, gou, gou, gou, gou, gou, gou... *[note: different written characters with the same pronunciation of "gou" are going through taiki's head.]*

Taiki was drawn into the sounds, and scenes were shown continuously in his mind: A person. Playing. Leaving. With the wind. A flag, fluttering. A whip, hitting, striking, water. --They overflow.

"Quickly according to the laws!"

It was simply intuition.

"Submit! Gouran!!" The dog stood up.

Amidst the haze, Taiki thought that this dog looked like a shiba inu. Just as he thought this, at every step, the shadow became smaller and smaller, and the fur on its body turned brown.

It would be good for it to be a small dog, but it would be better if the ends of its paws were white.

Gouran followed Taiki's wishes and transformed into a little dog. When the dog sat near Taiki's feet, it looked just like the shiba inu of his native land.

"Gouran..." Taiki bent down and the dog lifted its head to look at him, lovingly wagging its tail. Taiki reached out with his hand, and the dog licked it. He could feel the dog's warm tongue at his fingertips.

Taiki hugged the dog and pulled him close. His legs suddenly lost their strength and Taiki sat down in place.

4

"I can't believe it..." It didn't feel like he had just done what he did.

Deep inside, Taiki felt that he really wasn't a human, nor was he a beast. He was part of some power--a power both great and frightening.

(I'm not human.)

At this moment, he firmly believed that he was a kirin.

(So I'm not actually human...)

He realized profoundly just what kind of creature a kirin was.

Kirin are part of the Heavens. Thus, he was able to understand the Will of the Heavens, and also specifically express this Will.

--He was once confused. He could not believe that inside of his body, besides himself, there was another him.

Now, he finally understood.

It wasn't until after this that he discovered he possessed far more than the limits he had previously set for his own "self." Also, he had a direct connection with the Heavens. Unexpectedly, this enormous power had been poured into that little body of his.

"I can't believe it..."

Suddenly, upon hearing a voice, Taiki was brought back to his senses. He remembered that he was not the only one there. He hurriedly turned his head back and saw Gyousou in a daze, sitting amongst the rocks.

"And I thought that you would be snatched away by the toutetsu..."

Taiki forced himself to stand up though his legs didn't have strength in them. His legs shook, making it hard for him to walk forward.

"Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"No..." Taiki held Gouran in his arms and plopped down next to Gyousou. Although the torch had long since gone out, a sliver of light shone through a thin crack in the rocks, so that in what was originally a pitch black cavern, it was not so dark that one couldn't see their fingers in front of them.

He turned to his side to check the condition of Gyousou's injuries. After he looked up and down Gyousou's body closely and carefully, he discovered that Gyousou did not have any open wounds.

"Where do you hurt? Do you have any broken bones?" Taiki lifted his head to look at Gyousou only to see him shake his head.

"I...am not hurt anywhere." His blood-red eyes revealed a mysterious look. "I'm very sorry... I did not tell you the truth."

Taiki was struck dumb for a moment and then immediately comprehended Gyousou's reasons.

"Sir Gyousou..."

When Taiki had strongly urged him to leave, Gyousou understood very clearly.

--Under no circumstances should he have moved.

Had he moved, Taiki would surely have eased up a bit, and had Taiki eased up, it would have been all over. He didn't want to give the kirin, who was using all of his energy to deal with the toutetsu, any reason to relax.

Thus, he had decided then that he could not move. He understood extremely well that he could not split the kirin's attention. So he quietly sat where he was, not allowing Taiki to sense his presence, and looked on attentively at Taiki from the sidelines.

He silently looked at the child in front of him and what method he used to restrain this youma that was worthy of its reputation. He also understood in this way the determination that Taiki had previously mentioned. Other than determination, a better word could not be found to describe the intensity that had filled the cave at that time. He believed that Taiki probably shared feelings similar to him as well.

Gyousou could hardly even believe the things he had seen. He began to hold in astonishment the child in front of him.

"Thank you for saving my life."

"No..." Taiki shook his head. If it were not for Gyousou supporting him from behind, he probably would have been very quickly swallowed by Gouran's ambition.

If Taiki had been dejected at that time, Gyousou would probably have lost even his life. However, in order to obtain the state of mind not to escape and to stay where he was, it required a courage and wisdom that surpassed those of other people.

"I should be the one thanking you... Sir Gyousou...you are amazing..."

"Please save that talk for yourself." Gyousou smiled. He combed Taiki's sweat-drenched hair with his hand. "Really



incredible...that Tai Kingdom is protected by so great a kirin."

Taiki looked at the man in front of him, whose eyes were emanating a warmth.

(It is absolutely true; I really am a kirin...)

The hands that were holding Taiki tightly were really very gentle, but deep inside his heart, he was unable to cheer up.

(I am certain... Gyousou is not the king...)

5

"Ah! Just what was going on?" Teiei bit her hard fingernails and Youka's face was pale as she stood at one side.

"Has Madam Risai woken up?"

The faces on Risai's attendants were all helpless. At daybreak, the nin'you had brought back an unconscious Risai, whose wounds on her entire body were horrible to look at. After the nin'you had set Risai down, she didn't explain anything at all, immediately disappearing without a trace.

This kind of situation was hard to deal with even without the all the noise the nyosen were making. Risai, who had originally been entrusted with a great responsibility, was now sinking into a coma. By dusk, she had still not awakened.

"It was because we believed in Madam Risai, so we agreed to Taiki accompanying her. Now, Risai has come back, but we have not seen heads or tails of Taiki. What has happened?"

No matter how much they grumbled, Risai still did not move and did not respond.

"If by chance something unfortunate did happen, neither Risai nor us nyosen could live on so shamefully in this world." Just as the nyosen were reproaching themselves, they suddenly heard a loud noise.

"What was that?" Teiei looked around. Amongst the nyosen one of them pointed to the distance.

"Teiei! Look, a sugu is coming!"

"...Sir Gyousou!"

Under the light of the sun, they could only see a white light on top of the sugu, which was flying slowly towards them. Following the sugu was a tenba. One of Risai's attendants cried out. "Hien!"

They only saw Hien and a beast with a tail that was long like a whip flying past a nearby tent, and stopping soundlessly next to a group of people. The crowd saw Gyousou sitting on top of the sugu and the figure of a child laying in his arms, and all of them sent out sounds of welcome without exception.

"Gyousou!" Teiei parted the crowd as she ran to the sugu's side. "What has happened?"

Teiei shouted. Gyousou faced her wordlessly.

"Taiki..."

"He's asleep. He is perfectly all right, not a wound on him."

At hearing Gyousou say this, Teiei silently leaned forward. She saw the child in Gyousou's arms presently sleeping soundly, without any injuries on his body that were cause to worry, and there were certainly far from any signs of suffering in his appearance. With great difficulty, Teiei breathed a sigh of relief. "As long as he's all right..."

Gyousou carried Taiki down from his mount. "If it's convenient, I'll just take him like this into the palace to rest."

"Before that, I would like you to give me an explanation of what happened. We'll see if you can, depending on that."

Gyousou smiled and said, "The Kou is very tired. He probably fell asleep during the ride back on the sugu."

"You have been away until this late... I requested that you bring Taiki back before the afternoon. This could cause resentment!"

"I'm very sorry, but we should take him back to the palace first. I don't think that you could bear to wake him. Then shortly thereafter, I will give you an explanation."

It seemed as though there were other implications in Gyousou's words. Teiei looked all around her and discovered that the people surrounding them all carried lively expressions. She had no choice but to nod.

"...All right. Then, please." Teiei urged the nyosen to depart and walked in the front, leading the way to the big gate. She called Gyousou to enter Houro Palace.

"Now then, what happened exactly?" asked Teiei as she walking upon the winding paths.

"The taming took quite a while..."

Teiei opened her eyes wide, and from Youka to all the nyosen that followed behind, there rose a commotion after they heard these words.

"Tame? Are you referring to Taiki?"

"I know about the Kou not having his own shirei."

"Yes... That's right. But this matter..."

"You need not worry. I will not divulge this information. Moreover, this matter is not a disgrace for Tai, but one worthy of pride, because the Kou already has a shirei."

Teiei glanced at the smiling Gyousou and then looked at Taiki. "So..."

"He has very successfully subdued a shirei. He confronted his opposition all the way from daybreak until just a short while ago."

Teiei released a deep sigh, as if she had just put down a heavy burden. "So that's how it was... I blamed you for this, even before I understood the circumstances. I'm very sorry. Please forgive me."

"That's not necessary." Gyousou laughed and looked down at the child in his arms. He didn't know if it was because

Taiki was so tired, but as he was sleeping, his color looked a bit unhealthy. However, this would not have too big an impact. He simply needed to get some rest, and he will have recovered after he woke up.

Since Taiki could already subdue youma, then transformation shouldn't be any problem for him.

The Mt. Hou Kou was not injured and there wasn't anything to be worried about, so words of comfort were unnecessary here.

"I suppose it is a good thing..."

"He is a worthy black kirin... Unexpectedly, he has tamed a toutetsu."

Teiei immediately turned back to look at Gyouso. "What did you just say?"

"I said that he has subdued a toutetsu to become his shirei."

"How can that be...?"

From within the nyosen came sounds of surprise.

This was simply impossible. Because there was no way for toutetsu to become shirei, and they were even much less a youma that could be tamed by a kirin.

"I am also very surprised." Gyouso's line of sight fell upon the child in his arms. Taiki was sleeping very deeply; even his eyelashes didn't move.

"This time, it was by chance that he was able to open his eyes. At the very least, he is letting us know that he is not an ordinary kirin. Gradually, he will let us all see his abilities."

"Excuse me?"

"If you feel that what I say is disagreeable, then I ask that you forgive me. I have no secret intentions. It is just that he possesses such a great power, but is unaware of it. It's a little worrisome."

Teiei wrinkled her brow again.

"To take advantage of this situation to help him cultivate self-confidence would not necessarily be a bad thing. He put his life on the line to protect me. Had I not been there for him to protect, he might not have put in as much energy as he did. This could be very dangerous for him."

"Yes..."

"He has such strength, but not the slightest ambition. Is there some other reason for his lack of confidence? But regardless, his development in the future will cause both happiness and sorrow."

"Thank you for caring so much about him."

"This is as it should be... Perhaps I am only a person of Tai Kingdom who should not be saying such things, but I really think that if it is possible, it may be best for the Kou to live on Mt. Hou for a while longer. That would do him good."

Teiei looked unwaveringly at Gyouso. He understood the situation very well. It was a pity that a revelation did not accompany this sort of person.

Gyouso looked at the child in his arms. "He is a remarkable kirin... It really is regrettable."

## CHAPTER TEN

### 1

"Madam Risai, are you feeling better?" Taiki poked his head into the tent and saw Risai sit up.

"...Kou."

Because it was long distance travel, there was a limit to the number of attendants one could bring. Thus, they had to think about how many of their belongings they could take along with them, and their tents could not be prepared too comfortably. The equipment in the tents were very simple, and most of the things that are brought out would probably be daily living necessities. However, the weather on Mt. Hou was pretty good, so the tents were pitched with a thinner cloth material. Though this was the case, the interior did feel very spacious, and there were no worries about those from the outside seeing inside of the tent.

Originally lying down on a simple bed, Risai immediately got up and draped a coat over her shoulders. Taiki hurried to stop her.

"I think it would be better if you laid back down." Taiki gave some water to an attendant inside the tent. "Today, I helped the nyosen run errands. I brought you some water."

In order to avoid being impolite, Risai straightened up her appearance a bit and bowed her head, saying, "Thank you for your concern."

Under an attendant's arrangement, Taiki sat nearby Risai and looked at her face. "How are your wounds healing?"

"Many thanks to you for bringing the Sensui. The pain has already gone away."

"...Oh, good." Taiki sighed and cocked his head to the side. "I hope they don't leave scars."

Risai smiled. "Please don't worry. With the additional support of the Sensui, and taking into consideration that I am a sennin, even if my wounds were more serious, I would still be all right."

Taiki blinked his eyes. His face was full of bewilderment. "What do you mean? Madam Risai, you're a sennin?"

"Even though I'm in a provincial army, I only needed to be a general in order to enter the Immortal Register and become a sennin. If I didn't do this, then I could not have served the provincial Kou."

"Why?"

This time it was Risai's turn to look surprised. "Do you not know? The provincial Kou is not a human, but an

immortal. At the castle of the provincial Kou, if you are not a sennin, you cannot enter or exit. The provincial Kou has a very long life, and if those who serve at his side do not also have longevity, then they would not be of much use."

"Oh..."

Risai saw that Taiki's face was still full of confusion and was extremely amazed. She had heard that this kirin had been raised in Hourai until not too long ago. Could it be that there are no sennin in Hourai?

"Shinsen do not have a life span."

"Is that so?"

Risai sighed softly. "...Kou, you are also a shinsen. Didn't you know that?"

"I am?"

"Yes. The ruler inherently holds a position in the Divine Register. When he becomes the ruler, he will no longer age. Moreover, it is not very easy for him to die. At the very least, he will not die from disease."

"So that's how it is."

"Kirin are also in the Divine Register. Like the ruler, you will not grow old, nor will you become sick. It is not easy for you to be wounded, nor for you to die. There are also a few illnesses that will only affect kirin."

Taiki suddenly opened his eyes wide and thought for a little bit. "Then... will I grow older and older?"

"After you become an adult, you will then not continue to age."

"...I feel like...this is a little strange."

"The nyosen won't grow old or die of sickness either. I think that they have forgotten to tell you these things... This is pretty much it."

"Okay."

"The sennin support the ruler. Ordinarily, those who serve at the side of the ruler, or the provincial Kou as well as those who serve at the side of the Kou, they are all sennin."

"If only the king can live forever, then he can't accomplish much."

Risai smiled wryly. "I'm not too clear on the reason either. However, sennin won't become old or die of sickness either, but this is only within the time that they are sennin. The difference between the Immortal Register and the Divine Register is that one can enter or leave the Immortal Register at any time. One can decide whether or not they want to be a sennin."

"If you weren't a sennin, then would you grow old like most other people?"

"Yes. Hence, very few people will leave the Immortal Register of their own accord. For instance, I was promoted to general and then entered into the Register, but if I quit or am removed from the position of general, I must withdraw from the Register. In other words, my place in the Register is granted to me by the ruler. All the sennin that work under the king are called chisen."

"Oh..."

"Aside from this, there are people who voluntarily vow to become sennin, those who are not appointed by nor serve under a ruler. These sennin are called hisen. For example, the nyosen of Mt. Hou are considered hisen."

"So that's how it is..." After Taiki said this, he sighed. "Before, I had asked Teiei about her age, and she said that she had forgotten it. Maybe she has really already lived so long that she has forgotten her age."

"Perhaps." Risai smiled slightly. "So, you don't need to worry about my body. Compared to that of a regular person, I am much stronger."

"That's great!"

"That's right, I shouldn't only speak of me. What about you? Your body is all right?"

"Yes, I'm very good. I just feel really tired, and also I'm still afraid of seeing blood. Just those things. Actually, I could have come to see you earlier, but the nyosen wouldn't let me go out."

"I really am very embarrassed..."

Taiki snuck a look at Risai's ashamed face and lowered head. "Madam Risai, this was not your fault. If you must, blame the fact that I am a kirin."

"No..." Risai shook her head but could not speak.

She had taken the Yellow Sea too lightly. She would never have thought the youma that lived in the Yellow Sea would be too vicious even for her. She relied on her incomplete skills, and, full of confidence, she wanted to go and defeat a youma. She really had too low an opinion of her opponent.

--In addition, she was with another who was a general like her, and even if a little bit, she felt competitive with Gyouso. In fact, at the time she had anticipated that the cave would be dangerous, but she did not want others to mistakenly think that she did things hesitantly or that she had no courage.

"I'm really very sorry."

"Ah... I said before that this had nothing to do with you, Madam Risai. Who would have known that a toutetsu would be hiding in a place like that? Also, you even used yourself as a shield and urged me to get out of there quickly. And if this hadn't happened, I would not have understood how to tame shirei."

Risai looked at the child in front of her, who thought up all sorts of things so as she would not feel guilty. "You are too kind..."

"Everything I said was the truth."

Seeing the stern and serious expression on Taiki's face, Risai couldn't help but laugh a little. "I still need to thank you for the Sensui that you brought over. Thanks to your help, I can descend the mountain smoothly when the autumn solstice comes."

Taiki was a little taken aback. "Descend the mountain..."

--Why was this so strange to him? It was a very ordinary thing.

It wasn't as if Risai was like the nyosen and lived on Mt. Hou. The autumn solstice was the next Ankou Day, and when the time came, the Reison Gate on the southeastern side of the Yellow Sea would open.

He calculated that there was only probably half a month's time remaining that Risai would be staying on Mt. Hou. Then...

Taiki left Risai's tent, and was giving perfunctory responses to the people who were greeting him, when he suddenly stopped.

(Then...)

2

"What is wrong?"

A pair of hands rested on Taiki's shoulders, and after he came back to his senses, he discovered that it was Gyousou. As if he were unconscious, he had followed the path that he regularly walked and ended up in the area of Gyousou's tent without thinking.

"Oh, it's you, Sir Gyousou."

--It's a good thing Gyousou's still here.

When he realized that Risai and Gyousou would be going down the mountain soon, Taiki felt ill at ease.

Perceiving that he had been staring into space, Taiki felt a little embarrassed and half-heartedly laughed a bit. However, when he saw that Gyousou was wearing his black armor, he wrinkled his brow. This was the attire he had on his body when Taiki had seen him for the first time on Mt. Hou, as well as the time Gyousou had gone hunting for sugu.

"Are you doing all right?"

"Yeah..."

"What is the matter? You have a very serious expression on your face."

Taiki immediately sighed and haltingly said, "I was just thinking that...right now, there isn't even a month's time before the autumn solstice..."

Gyousou nodded in agreement. "It is already time to climb down the mountain. Those friends of mine who are unexperienced in martial skill have said many times that they would like me to decide on a time to descend the mountain."

"Is that so?" Taiki looked at Gyousou's face once again with fresh eyes. "Why are you wearing armor?"

"Ah, this..." Without finishing what he was saying, Gyousou knelt down in submission in front of Taiki. "You've come at just the right time. I was planning on going down the mountain in a short while."

"Huh?" Taiki stared blankly at Gyousou. The words that Gyousou had said to Taiki struck him hard. His face suddenly lost all color.

"I was just about to go and bid Madam Risai farewell."

"...You're going down the mountain in a short while?"

Gyousou casually laughed a little. "Yes. I intend to search for sugu again on the road back. Many people have said that they wanted to come with me... I had originally thought that I would not be able to run into you again and thus not be able to bid you farewell. This is good that I was able to see you..."

Taiki looked around and discovered that Gyousou's tent had already disappeared. The stake that was used to tie down his mount had also been put away. The area had recovered its flat appearance.

"How did you pick this time to climb down the mountain?"

"This time, horses will be coming with us. If we don't leave now, we will probably not be able to reach the Yellow Sea by nighttime."

"But, isn't the Yellow Sea really dangerous at night?"

Gyousou laughed as he stood up. "If it wasn't at night, then the sugu would be sleeping. In order to catch sugu, we must travel at night."

As Taiki was thinking about how dangerous this was, he immediately remembered that Gyousou was already very used to catching sugu. He had already gone to the Yellow Sea more than a few times to catch sugu, which is how he had been able to catch Keito.

"Then...will you come back when Ankou Day comes again?"

"If we don't manage to catch a sugu on this return trip, then there might be the possibility..."

Taiki wasn't sure if he should say this, but in the end, he couldn't keep it in. "Then...will you have an opportunity to pass by Mt. Hou?"

Gyousou looked at Taiki.

"No, because there is only one opportunity a year for coming to Mt. Hou like this." He smiled as he reminded Taiki, "First of all, if I really wanted to pass by Mt. Hou, I would have to do it within the length of an Ankou Day."

It wasn't even necessary to think about it. There was no more certain answer than this. Even with Keito, whose speed was like that of the wind, it was an impossibility to make the trip to Mt. Hou from deep within the Yellow Sea in a single day. In order to really meet, they would have to do it before the Reison Gate opened at noon; however, rushing back to Mt. Hou after the hunt at night would be just about the time the door closed.

"...Sir Gyousou, since you are the general of the Oushi, there should be further opportunities for us to meet, right?" Taiki looked up at Gyousou and forced himself to squeeze out a smile. Gyousou laughed bitterly.

"It is possible we will not."

"Huh?"

"I do not plan on returning to the Oushi. I am going to withdraw from the Immortal Register and leave Tai Kingdom."

Taiki unconsciously clenched his hands. "...Why?"

"There is no way for me to endure the feeling of disgrace."

Taiki widened his eyes and then lowered his head.

"I do not mean to blame you. I just do not feel that I ever had the qualities required to be a ruler."

"But..."

"Do not worry. There will always be opportunities for a person like me, and a kingdom that needs to borrow my skills. After all, I am a warrior. I cannot now change and become a merchant."

Taiki lifted his head and looked at Gyousou. "...So you're saying that we will never have an opportunity to meet again?"

"I am afraid so." Gyousou smiled as before.

--It seemed as if leaving Taiki didn't make him sad at all. If Taiki had still been sleeping now, he would probably even have left without saying goodbye and descended the mountain.

"Even if you wanted to go hunt sugu...there's still a stretch of time before the autumn solstice..." It wasn't easy to say something that might persuade Gyousou, who then smiled.

"I cannot do this sort of thing, since I was not chosen, nor do I have any reason to shamelessly linger upon Mt. Hou. I do not want people to mistakenly think that I yearn for the position of ruler and refuse to leave the mountain."

After he said this, Gyousou took his big hand and lightly patted Taiki's head. "Do not look so sad. You have nothing to worry about. Believe that you can find somebody who is even greater than I. At the very least, I have now become a bit more modest."

Gyousou laughed, but Taiki could not do the same. Suddenly, they heard a person looking for Gyousou, who then raised his hand and motioned to the other person. He bowed towards Taiki. "I am going now to bid Madam Risai a farewell."

"All right..."

Gyousou left to visit Risai and returned before long. Within this period of time, it was as if Taiki had swallowed a stone. He stood where he was and didn't move.

"Please take good care of yourself. I wish you a long life and prosperity for the kingdom." Gyousou stood at Keito's side as he said this.

--These were words of parting. As soon as Taiki nodded, Gyousou would grasp the reins and ride away on Keito, and they would never see each other again.

Even in his imagination, it made Taiki feel extremely pained. However, he had no means by which to stop Gyousou.

"So long." After Gyousou paid his respects, he turned around and walked away. Taiki looked at his back. He hoped that Gyousou would turn around and look back at him. But Taiki was very clear on the fact that Gyousou was not the kind of person who would do something like that. If it had been Risai, she would have given honor to a child who admired her and would certainly have delayed a day, or perhaps in the end, for Taiki's sake, she would have stayed until the conclusion of Ankou Day before she left. But this was not something that Gyousou would do.

Gyousou mounted Keito, and after the people around Taiki paid him their respects in succession, they departed one by one. After waiting for everyone to climb on their mounts, Keito started to stride slowly away.

Gyousou didn't look back and headed off without any hesitation.

3

The moon was out.

The moonlight entered through the thin curtains and shone on the bed.

Gyousou and the people with him had probably already arrived at the base of Mt. Hou.

Was camping going to be dangerous for them? Or were they going to be chasing sugu during the night, waiting until almost daybreak to set up camp?

"You...can't sleep?" Sanshi asked. Taiki unconsciously stop moving his hand, which had been stroking Sanshi's fur.

"Madam Risai's going to be staying for a little bit longer, right?"

"Yes..."

Taiki could not put his mind at rest. He turned about in the bed until he finally couldn't bear it any longer and got out of bed.

"I would like to go on a walk... Can I?"

"You cannot go to the Yellow Sea at night."

With Sanshi having seen through his thoughts, Taiki lowered his head. "Then...traveling there would be pretty dangerous too, huh?"

"Most likely."

Perhaps they would encounter youma that are like toutetsu. Taiki had previously heard about many people losing their lives on the road to the Yellow Sea. Not to mention the fact that Gyousou's group was not large.

"Gouran."

"Yes?" The sound came from under the bed. Gouran's voice was low and deep. At first Gouran was a little dog, but recently he usually changed into a red dog that Taiki had not anticipated.

"Gouran, can you see Sir Gyousou to the Reison Gate for me? I want him to get there without any trouble."

"I cannot," replied Gouran, strongly and concisely. "I cannot leave Taiki's side."

"You can't...even if I ask you to?"

"Right now, your safety is more important than anything else. Moreover, Gyousou is not the king."

...There it is again. Taiki bit his lip.

Whether it was a way to stop Gyousou from leaving, or trying to find a way to get him to turn back, or even wanting him to reach one of the Four Gates safely, nothing that Taiki did was successful.

If only Gyousou was the king.

Why hadn't there been a revelation? How good would it be if there had been.

(Then...)

Taiki was so sad he almost cried. When certain thoughts appeared in his mind, he would firmly swallow his tears.

(This matter...only kirin know about it...)

Taiki opened up his eyes wide and then hurriedly shut them. His heart was beating very quickly.

(Why are things like this?)

Taiki was also a little surprised. Why was it that whenever he thought about being separated from Gyousou, he would feel so awful inside? The person he had originally liked was Risai, and he had also previously wished that Risai could be the queen. The strange thing was that Risai was going to descend the mountain, but this didn't make Taiki feel that kind of sadness.

He silently got out of bed. He constantly felt an oppressive sensation and lying on the bed was not relieving him of that ache.

"Taiki..."

"I'm just going outside." Wearing his pajamas, he despondently walked down the stone steps of the palace.

There was only one road that one could walk to the foot of Mt. Hou, but once in the Yellow Sea, a countless number of roads extend outwards. Not to mention that Gyousou was going to be hunting as he traveled, so he might not have taken a main road. Once they reach the Yellow Sea, it would be extremely hard to find them.

He would pass through the dangers of the Yellow Sea to get to the Four Gates, and after Ankou Day came, he would go outside of the Kongou Mountains. When that happens, there would be no way to catch up to him.

After Gyousou returns to the Kingdom of Tai, he will resign from his position in the Oushi and leave Tai Kingdom. In the end, no matter where he goes, Taiki would probably not even be able to contact him.

...This could not be stopped now.

Taiki hadn't chosen Gyousou, so he was leaving Tai Kingdom. In this way, with regards to Gyousou, Taiki was but a worthless 10-year-old child. A person like Gyousou, who is unafraid of what lies ahead of him, will probably never condescend to looking back at a worthless person.

There isn't much of a difference between this and a separation by death.

Gyousou's distance from Mt. Hou is increasing step by step, just like he will also slowly forget about Taiki. The link between Gyousou and himself will become weaker and weaker. After one of the Four Gates opens and closes, without a doubt, the connection between him and Gyousou will be severed.

Taiki stood up.

4

"Taiki!" Sanshi saw Taiki, who had been sitting silently hanging his head, get up suddenly. She hurriedly reached her arms out and wrapped them around his body. "Don't go! The night--"

The night was incomparable to the day. Not to mention that now, it was already very late in the night, just as the shiki was spreading. Thus, youma were becoming more and more active.

"No! Taiki...!"

Taiki shook off Sanshi's arms. He just couldn't bear it. At the thought that he might never have another opportunity to see Gyousou again, he couldn't suppress the agitation in his heart.

"What's going on, Sanshi?" Youka looked out from Rosen Palace to see what was happening. A few nyosen stood behind Youka and watched for further occurrences with doubt all over their faces.

He knew very well that no matter where he ran, the nyosen, Sanshi and Gouran would most certainly try to catch him. However, he still had to go.

Sanshi leapt and landed in front of the fleeing child. In no way could she let Taiki go to the Yellow Sea at night.

Because of the effects of Risai's injuries as well as Gouran's own blood-soaked nature, Taiki had slept deeply for a while. He had finally recovered his energy with some difficulty and was now able to walk around outside. Where there was no strength, there was then no energy. If he encountered a youma now, Taiki did not even have the power now to subdue it.

When their master's strength is weak, the strength of shirei will also become weak. No matter if it's Sanshi or Gouran, their link to Taiki was already inseparable. Besides the smaller youma, if Taiki encountered a youma that was like Gouran, there would be no escaping from it.

Carrying a mortal determination, she held onto the running Taiki's body, hoping to stop him. "Taiki!"

--He surprisingly eluded Sanshi's obstruction.

Sanshi sprung through the air and looked dully at her own hands. She thought that she had grabbed onto Taiki.

Though she felt a little taken aback, she immediately turned around and reached out for another attempt. She looked at the hand that she thought had gotten a hold of Taiki, but again she was denied success. All the child was doing was running around erratically, hiding here and there, so why couldn't she catch him no matter what she did?

--It's just like the last time! Sanshi suddenly widened her eyes.

This was exactly the same as before during the taming of Gouran. It was as if someone had cursed her. She couldn't get a hold of him regardless of what she tried.

--Why?

Though he was beginning to open his eyes to the powers he possessed, he was still only a small and weak kirin.

"Gouran!" Hearing Sanshi's voice, a beast leapt out from the shadow of a crag and blocked Taiki's path. No one knew what sort of magic Taiki used, but he unexpectedly traded places with the beast that had been blocking him.

Sanshi again leapt through the air and landed in front of the boy, but just as she prepared to stop him, he avoided her. With some effort, she managed to grab onto his wrist, though he almost shook her off. After some tossing about, Sanshi finally took hold of his sleepwear.

"Please, Taiki. The night..." Before Sanshi could finish speaking, the nyosen who were rushing up behind her stopped running and couldn't help but gape.

The pajamas in Sanshi's hand lost the tightness it had from being pulled about, and fluttered around lightly as it laid in her hand.

"Ah..." Sanshi involuntarily let out a cry of surprise and heard the nyosen make similar sounds. Then, following the lines of sight of the nyosen, she lifted her head.

In the moonlit night, the rocks were black, as were the shadows. Along the lines of the ridge that made the crags distinct, there was an indistinct silver shape. What the group of people saw was a glowing beast galloping through the night sky.

"Taiki..."

His short mane was the color of steel. The black fur on his back was interwoven with the colors of silver and mica, and his head and hooves were jet black. On his forehead was a short horn of pearl.

--I must catch up to him.

Sanshi held on to the pajamas in her hand tightly.

However, in this world, one could not find a creature that was able to catch up to a kirin at full gallop.

5

All Taiki could think about was running.

After he had evaded Gouran and shaken off Sanshi's hand, when he began to run, he suddenly felt his body grow much lighter. Having obtained this ability, he ran forward even more quickly. When he realized what he was doing, he had already sped up into the sky.

After a few steps, Taiki discovered that he had transformed. Looking back, he saw only Rosen Palace far behind him.

Taiki did not feel any unease or pain. In his mind, he thought only of running forward, and his four legs shot him ahead.

After another few steps, he had arrived at Hoto Palace. The fires of the torches that the mountain-climbers had lit, left a trail that was dim and far away.

The first to notice him was the sugu.

Gyousou looked at his own mount. He was just planning on taking advantage of the moonlight to start hunting. He suddenly stopped preparing the saddle.

"What is it?"

The sugu looked up into a corner of the sky and called out deeply from his throat. At first, Gyousou thought it was a night attack by youma. However, the sugu did not appear to be nervous at all.

He squinted, following the sugu's line of sight, and immediately spotted what the sugu was seeing. Backed by the moonlight, there was a beast that could only be described as graceful, galloping towards him.

--A black kirin!

Just as Gyousou felt like exclaiming, a lingering feeling floated back into his mind. It was because he could not allow himself to feel such attachment to Taiki that he chose to leave the mountain early.

The others who had not yet fallen asleep lifted their heads and looked up into the sky in the same way. And as if they had previously arranged it, they let out a cry of surprise. The kirin's tail was reminiscent of fireflies, giving off a glow. He finally stopped on top of a rock from which he could overlook the encampment.

The area was a depression surrounded by bushes and rocks, in which there were tents, mounts, as well as people staring dumbfoundedly into the sky and standing in the middle of five lit torches.

"What a...magnificent kirin." The first to speak was Gyousou. He smiled as he spoke, putting the saddle down on the ground. "What is it, Kou? Have you come especially to see us off?"

Taiki hesitated a little before finally deciding to walk down off the crag to stand in the depression. He knew that he

was stepping towards a criminal act.

"From appearances, it looks like you can already transform. I am very happy for you. It really is an unexpected honor to have this rare opportunity to see such a unique sight. It is hard to imagine that this is the Kou."

Taiki had no way of responding.

"Though you already have shirei now, it is still a bit careless. You should hurry and return to the palace." Seeing that Taiki was not going to move, Gyousou took a robe out from his bags. "Or is it that...you have come to see me about something?"

Gyousou spread the robe out and draped it over Taiki's body, who had then undone his beast form. It wasn't clear how he knew how to recover his human form. In reality, it was as if he didn't put any effort into changing back. There was only the sudden feeling that his body had become heavier.

He looked up at Gyousou, who had laid a robe around him. The two looked at each other and Taiki saw only warmth in Gyousou's eyes. They was nothing the least bit frightening about them.

--The fear was within himself. Did he really know what he was doing?

"Sir Gyousou..."

(There was clearly no revelation...)

However, there was no better way than this. Taiki knelt down in submission and Gyousou widened his eyes.

"Kou...?"

Taiki bowed his head down low. He was laying prostrate as if he was asking Gyousou to forgive him.

"I will never abandon you...never disobey your royal command...and I pledge my loyalty to you." He had violated the Providence of the Heavens and betrayed the nyosen, the ruler, as well as everyone else. "This I vow."

(How could I possibly do this...?)

Gyousou was silent for a moment.

With Gyousou's eyes upon him, Taiki felt so bad that he was not able to breathe.

It was not too late now to turn back! Just as Taiki thought this, a calm voice came from above his head. "I accept."

It was no longer possible to take it back now. Taiki simply lowered his head further. To be in this position was hard to endure.

What a betrayal! For all those who had up until now shown him that much love and concern, for the kingdom, its ruler and its people, and even for Gyousou, it was all a deception for which there was no way out.

Taiki pressed his forehead upon Gyousou's feet. His body was now pierced with the feeling of having committed a crime, and he all he could see in front of him was darkness.

--I want to take it back.

This is all a lie, he nearly shouted. He felt an unreal sense of drifting away, and he stopped himself from almost crying out.

Gyousou helped Taiki get up. Taiki looked at Gyousou in surprise, for the latter had revealed a smiling face.

"Let us forgo formalities... Taiki!"

Taiki didn't know how to respond. The surroundings were stirred up into a commotion. Gyousou picked Taiki up and turned in a circle, letting everyone take a look at him. As if there was nothing else in the world worth feeling pride over than the kirin in his arms, he smiled at Taiki. "Though you are young, you have quite a good eye for things."

Taiki could no longer withstand Gyousou's direct gaze, and by accident his eyes fell upon the arrival of the pursuing Sanshi.





--So it turns out that he was the king.

When Sanshi saw Taiki pressing his head near Gyouso's feet, she came to that sudden realization. It was very clear to her that Taiki had felt a sort of fear of Gyouso that he couldn't quite put into words.

Taiki was now already really used to spending time with Gyouso, and he had never originally been the kind that was shy to strangers, so it didn't seem as though this was special. In terms of friendship, it was obvious that he was closer to Risai than Gyouso by far. Thus, that's why the fact that Taiki had been so insistent about going to find Gyouso had quite perplexed Sanshi.

She had followed the spirit of Taiki (in Sanshi's eyes, it was always a golden glow) and chased him to the Yellow Sea, with one part of her mind in doubt.

Why couldn't she catch the running Taiki? Why had Taiki suddenly transformed into a kirin?

Perhaps "will" was the best explanation. The will of Taiki, who had wanted to see Gyouso with all his heart, allowed him to remove with determination any obstructions that hampered him.

--Was it that Taiki had previously subconsciously hesitated in trying to avoid Sanshi's grasp, and so the transformation that had up until today been impossible became possible?

The question was, why was it only when Gyouso was involved that Taiki finally revealed an intense will that didn't quite fit with him?

The feeling that Taiki's appearance gave other people was just like that of a weak, passive kirin. But because of an unknown reason, Taiki had very little confidence in himself. At times, his excessive modesty, on the contrary, let others feel like it was self-loathing.

When a kirin with this sort of personality displays their strong will, they will always be paired with someone like Gyouso. To Sanshi, Taiki's safety was paramount, regardless of the meaning behind the awakening of Taiki's willpower, his evasion of Sanshi's hand, his subduing of a toutetsu into becoming a shirei, and even the first time he transformed.

There had been no way for Sanshi to clearly see from beginning to end the reasons behind everything that had happened. Perhaps the power that Taiki possessed could not be seen, or there were other, better explanations for this.

She needed only to hide herself in order to more easily attach herself to Taiki's shadow. Wherever he went, she would follow him. Only when she had to stop Taiki would she then appear. Sanshi carried within herself a relentless spirit and leapt across the crags with Gouran. It was not an easy thing to catch up to her master amid the foothills of Mt. Hou.

It wasn't until she saw the scene before her eyes that she completely understood.

--Taiki must have acted in desperation.

He may not have had such deep thoughts and emotions, but being pulled along by a great power that far surpassed his own abilities, Taiki desperately wanted to do what he had set out to do. --It was all because Gyouso was the king.

Sanshi walked into the basin, and Taiki turned to look at her. His face was full of a fear that he couldn't help but show. She smiled at Taiki, and then she made her own body melt into Taiki's shadow.

If Gyouso was the king, why did Taiki still reveal a fearful expression? Why did it take so long before he knew that Gyouso was the king? She was full of questions, but since she had already caught up to Taiki, Sanshi didn't insist on the answers to any of them. This was because, for Sanshi, there was nothing as important as Taiki in this world.

Gyouso and those with him returned to Mt. Hou and saw the pale-faced nyosen gathered in front of Hoto Palace.

"Taiki...! Everyone was worried to death!"

Seeing Gyouso carrying Taiki down from Keito, Youka immediately rushed forward. "What on earth happened? Why has Sir Gyouso also returned...?"

Gyouso smiled without replying. The servants at Gyouso's side came together to respond in his place. "The Kou came to chase back his master!"

The crowd that had gathered around Hoto Palace began to discuss this one after another, in the end it became a collective cheering.

Youka saw Gyouso smiling from ear to ear and also Taiki, whom Gyouso had brought back, showing a fearful expression.

"His master... Then..." Youka knelt upon the ground. "Can it be that there was a revelation?"

Taiki couldn't answer her. The attendants beside them made sounds of certainty for him. Following this, they heard even more convincing news.

"He has already given the oath." This was Sanshi's voice.

Youka opened her mouth in surprise. She widened her eyes and looked at Teiei. Teiei nodded with a serious face, and then immediately knelt down. She placed her hands on the ground, and her torso lay prostrate; the surrounding nyosen saw this and followed in succession. "Congratulations, Lord Gyouso."

The man whose hand was upon Taiki's shoulder smiled and nodded.

Not moving from the position she was in, Teiei continued on to say, with a slight quiver in her voice, "Long live King Tai and Tai Taiho."

--At this point, Taiki's crime had already become irreversible.

Gyousou's master and servant residences were very quickly moved into Houro Palace. Gyousou stayed at Tankei Palace, which was situated closer to the outside.

The area that Houro Palace occupies is very broad. Since ancient times, it has always been here that an auspicious day is chosen on which to receive the Tenchoku.

From now on, the manner in which the nyosen treated Gyousou underwent a complete change. He is considered the superior of the nyosen, as well as Taiki's master. There was no excuse to be inhospitable to him.

A great number of nyosen were dispatched to Tankei Palace in order to serve Gyousou and his attendants. They took care of each and every need of their daily life, from when they got out of bed until they went to sleep. It was simply a dramatic change.

Not long ago, when Gyousou encountered the nyosen, he had to bow. Now, the roles were reversed. The nyosen had to give Gyousou complete courtesy. It was no longer necessary for Gyousou to pay any sort of respect to any of the nyosen; the same applied even if it was the Mt. Hou Kou. At present, if he stepped outside of Houro Palace, a person who had been his friend of the same generation yesterday, today would have to prostrate themselves in respect.

--Gyousou sat at a supreme status.

"Congratulations, your majesty." A few days before the chosen auspicious day, Risai had finally come to offer him praise.

"Are you able to get out of bed and walk about now?"

"I am very sorry to have worried you, my lord." Risai bowed and lowered her head, and then faced Taiki.

"Congratulations, Taiho."

"Thank you..." Taiki showed a lack of energy, which caused Risai to feel a bit astonished.

"Forgive my rudeness, but might I ask if all is well with the Taiho?"

The child uneasily forced out a sliver of a smile. "Everything's fine... It's just that being called Taiho is a little strange..."

Risai laughed. "I believe that you will become accustomed to it very quickly."

"Yes..."

Risai smiled at the slightly troubled Taiki and then looked up at Gyousou. "Actually, besides coming especially to congratulate you, I have also come to bid you farewell."

Gyousou furrowed his brow. "Are you leaving the mountain?"

"Yes. On the one hand, I feel as if it is time I should be returning, so I will descend the mountain with those who are leaving tomorrow."

Gyousou nodded. "That's good. You must take good care of yourself. When the time comes, we will meet again in Tai Kingdom."

"Yes. Thank you for your grace."

After the brief meeting, seeing Risai getting ready to leave Tankei Palace, Taiki turned to Gyousou and asked, "Can I see Madam Risai off?"

Gyousou smiled.

"Go ahead." Just as he finished speaking, Gyousou suddenly raised his hand. "Ah, Risai."

"Yes?"

"The Kingun is short one general. What do you think?"

Facing Gyousou's invitation, Risai smiled calmly. "I believe that there must be other candidates more suited to this position than I. Compared to the merits and character of each general, I am lacking by far. I believe that there are more appropriate candidates that my lord should be able to promote."

"I understand." Gyousou smiled just slightly, and with his eyes, he indicated that Risai could depart.

After Risai took a bow and exited the palace, Taiki went after her and caught up with her.

"Madam Risai, don't you want to be a general of the Kingun?" Taiki walked with Risai upon the narrow paths amid the strange crags.

"It is not that I do not want to. I just believe that there should be other candidates who are better than I am. I would like to give the position up to an even more exceptional person."

"Madam Risai, you really are great," Taiki mumbled to himself.

Risai saw that Taiki's face was full of worry and asked with concern, "You seem to be very weary. Is there something on your mind?"

"No."

No matter how she looked at it, it didn't seem as if nothing was wrong.

"Is there something bothering you?" asked Risai once more. Taiki lifted his head and looked at Risai.

"Madam Risai, since Gyousou has turned out to be the king, are you happy?"

Risai blinked her eyes and understood what was troubling Taiki. "Of course I am happy. Do you remember? I had said to you before that Sir Gyousou would certainly make an excellent king..."

"Of course I remember."

"If it had not been Sir Gyousou, and instead been I who was chosen, I do not think that even I could have convinced myself of the fact. To become the ruler of one's own kingdom, you need to have the admiration of the people, as well as their whole-hearted respect. That is what a truly good leader is. You have made the right choice. For that, I thank you."

Taiki wanted to smile, but he couldn't.

"Kou, do not think about it too much. The ruler is decided by the Heavens."

Risai's words of comfort were like a sharp pain stabbing into his heart.

"Taiho, why do you look so unhappy?" asked Gyousou, after he saw Taiki coming back into the palace, having seen Risai off.

"It's nothing."

"It seemed like Risai also felt uncertain... Every time I look at you, I feel as if I had kidnapped you."

"No..."

Youka, who had been at the side holding back, smiled. "However, when the Taiho has to leave Mt. Hou, it will become very lonely here, like when he was still very little, he was initially in Hourai. Then, it wasn't easy to get used to life over here, and now he has to depart again."

Gyousou nodded. But Youka's words shook Taiki's heart. He hadn't even thought of the day he had to leave Mt. Hou and the nyosen. Gyousou beckoned to Taiki.

"...When you were in Hourai, what was your name?" Taiki hesitantly walked to Gyousou's side. Gyousou laughed, "Everyone calls you Taiho. I fear that asking you to shoulder this great responsibility in such a short time might be overwhelming. Come, tell me your name."

"...Takasato Kaname."

On the palm of his hand, he wrote out the characters of his name. Gyousou laughed. "A very good name. You are literally 'important' to Tai Kingdom." *[note: the character for kaname can mean 'important.']*

Taiki shut his eyes.

"Your surname is very interesting. Did you know that there is also a peak on Mt. Hou called Kouri?" *[note: takasato and kouri are written with similar characters.]*

"No."

"It is said that the souls of the dead will return to this place. If you add a grass radical to the 'kou' character, then it is the name of the mountain where the dead reside. The omen would sooner be good than unlucky."

"The dead..."

To the murmuring Taiki, Gyousou nodded his head. "The shiki has finally turned into seiki; and dead things are finally returning to living things. Kouri, I hope in regards to Tai Kingdom, brings a promise of a return to life."

Taiki lowered his head in silence.

For someone who had committed a crime, this was simply a torment that never stopped. However, he could not find any ways by which he could sufficiently make it up.

4

The auspicious day had finally arrived.

Youka was wearing all black when she came to receive the fully-bathed Taiki, who was wearing his ceremonial attire.

In good times, black is worn; in times of misfortune, white is worn. Taiki was very clear on the fact that these customs were completely opposite to those in Hourai, but in his guilt-ridden heart, he saw the black clothes of the nyosen as if they were suggesting something.

--He didn't feel this was lucky at all.

Youka lay flat on the floor and paid her proper respects. "Tai Taiho, the auspicious time has arrived."

"All right..." For Taiki, this felt like he was about to participate in a funeral procession.

A worried Youka looked up and asked, "What's wrong? Did you not sleep well yesterday?"

Taiki was unable to respond. He hadn't slept at all.

In a moment, he was about to climb to the summit of Mt. Hou with Gyousou. After waiting there and receiving the Tenchoku, Gyousou would formally become king with the approval of the Heavens.

...It's certain that he'll be found out to be a fraud.

Taiki wasn't clear on how the ceremony would proceed. He just knew that the Heavens would certainly not forgive him for the crime he had committed.

Later, it would be charged that Gyousou was not the king, and Taiki would be censured because he had falsely sworn an oath to Gyousou that made him the king.

He could not imagine what kind of punishment awaited him, but this was all Taiki's fault; none of the blame lay on Gyousou. At the right time, he planned to accept responsibility for all of his transgressions. It was not necessary for receive a condemnation.

With his brain full of such thoughts, there was definitely no way for him to fall asleep.

Youka looked intently at Taiki and reached her hands out while she knelt upon the floor. Taiki silently walked to Youka's side.

Youka gently rubbed Taiki's hair. "It's still too short..."

"Is it?"

"Yes. Don't think that us nyosen didn't notice. It's not easy to change into such a beautiful kirin. It's too bad your mane isn't long enough..."

Taiki comprehended that Youka was referring to his transformation, and couldn't help but nod. "Did you see it clearly?"

The night of the transformation he hadn't thought to give the nyosen a good look at him--whether it was the nyosen or he himself, they had both once anticipated his change.

"Yes. I was very happy." Youka carefully stroked Taiki's hair. "Lord Gyousou is a king you can depend on. This brought me even greater joy."

"Joy...?"

Youka winked. "Of course. It...will be a bit lonely."

Youka was the nyosen closest and kindest to Taiki. She had poured into him so much concern and compassion.

"...Youka." Taiki hugged Youka as she was kneeling on the floor.

--Could it be that this was goodbye?

"Taiki, you must take care of yourself."

I'm sorry... Taiki said, secretly in his heart.

Ever since he had come to Mt. Hou, he had constantly felt sorry for what he put the nyosen through--he had not been able to transform; he wasn't able to subdue a shirei; not to mention his terrible betrayal.

How wonderful would it be if he could start it all over anew? It would be great if he had at first just obediently seen Gyousou off the mountain.

Had that happened, he wouldn't feel this guilty, and he wouldn't have to leave Mt. Hou. It would also have been like before: to go to bed at the urging of Youka's singing, to eat with all the nyosen, to roam around the pathways of the maze with Sanshi--he probably could have continued to lead the life he had previously lived.

Youka lightly stroked Taiki's back, and then pulled him into an embrace.

"It's almost time. We should go."

5

Taiki was brought to Untei Palace on the south side of Houro Palace, situated at the base of a cliff.

Inside the palace, there was a great crimson gate. When he had nothing to do, Taiki would often walk to various palaces and look around. He remembered that when he had previously seen the gate open, there was a green cliff wall behind it. Now, in place of the wall, there appeared a set of steps.

The steps looked as if they were made out of crystal, and a light passed through from beneath them, brightening up its surroundings. On top of the unusual steps, a white bird that resembled a crow waited for Gyousou and Taiki's arrival.

The nyosen were prostrated and spread out in a row. Gyokuyou bowed deeply towards Gyousou and Taiki as they proceeded to the gate.

"Long live the King and the Taiho."

Gyousou and Taiki returned the bow.

At the white bird's urging, Gyousou took one step up and immediately his back became rigid. In that moment, Taiki was so frightened that the blood left his face, thinking that Gyousou had actually received a punishment. He held his breath and watched for something else to happen. He discovered that nothing unusual occurred. Gyousou continued up the stairs.

It wasn't until Taiki took the first step that he understood why Gyousou's body had suddenly stiffened up.

--It felt like an electrical current passing through.

A stream coursed from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head, and deeply imprinted itself in Taiki's mind:

"It has been said that in the Beginning, there were Nine States and Four Barbarians.

"The Common People did not know of Order. The Son of Heaven knew of Order, but ridiculed it and did not honor it. He spurned the Will of Heaven and Earth, neglected the Way of Benevolence, and exceedingly disregarded Law and Discipline. Every time Smoke took to the Wind, the Ravages of War spread for Thousands of Miles and the Four Corners of the World were covered in Ash. Men and Horses were lost and the Flow of Blood carved out Rivers.

"At this, Tentei felt Sorrow, as He could not find the Way to a Solution and lead them to Order. The People indulged in Obscene Voices and enjoyed themselves selfishly.

"Tentei lamented and sent down a Resolution: I will now completely destroy the Nine States and Four Barbarians, and return to the Past of the Creator. After the Creation of the World, there will be Order. After the Beginning of Things, there will be Law and Discipline."

It was as if someone was guiding him, and he took another step up.

"Tentei created Thirteen Kingdoms. The Kingdom in the Center was the Yellow Sea and Mt. Hou, and He asked Oubo to protect this Place.

"The Remaining Twelve Kingdoms, He distributed to Rulers, and to each, He bestowed Branches which were the Foundations of Kingdoms.

"Upon the Branch, there was a Snake that held up the Sky.

"Upon the Branch, there were Three Fruit. One Fruit fell and formed the Throne. One Fruit fell and formed the Land. One Fruit fell and formed the People.

"The Branch then transformed into a Jade Brush. This was the Creation."

There was no time to consider the meaning of these things.

"There is One Fundamental Principle. The World must be governed with the Way of Benevolence.

"The People must not be oppressed, War must not be waged, the Taxes must not be severe, nor must the Laws. The People must not be sacrificed, the People must not be enslaved, the Public Land must not be appropriated. The Violation of these is Inexcusable. Follow the Way, and Respect the Virtue. The Peace and Health of the People are the Fortunes of a Kingdom."

With every step he took, more information was written.

"This is no more than: The Duty of the Son of Heaven. The Duty of the Prime Minister. The Formation of the World, the Formation of the Kingdoms, the Formation of the System. What the Way of Benevolence is, what the Rituals are. What must be done, what must not be done. What must be established, what must not be established."

He walked up the stairs as if he were attached to them, and when he came back to his senses, Taiki appeared under the light of the sun. He immediately heard the sound of the red gate closing behind them. The two were already standing at the top of the steps. The eyes of the white bird that was watching them sparkled in the sunlight.

Just as the closing of the door made that faint sound, Taiki recovered his ability to hear.

At first, the sound of waves came to his ear. He hastily looked around him, and what unfolded in front of his eyes, as soon as he looked, was an endless ocean.

"A sea of clouds..." It wasn't until now that Taiki understood. The sea of clouds in the sky separated the heavens from the world.

Behind Taiki on the small island where he was, there stood a small shrine. The red door of the shrine closed quietly. In front of Taiki were stone steps that led to a grand temple. Around the island, he could vaguely see small islands in the distance that looked like unmoving lotus flowers in the midst of turbulent seas.

He somehow knew then how to proceed. He entered the temple and lit incense for Seioubo and Tentei. Gyousou vowed to obey the Way and follow the Virtue. After this, Genbu appeared and guided them across the sea of clouds to Hakkei Palace in Kouki, the capital of Tai Kingdom.

Taiki was stunned. He knew that his face was most certainly pale.

--It was already over.

Taiki had thought that some sort of ceremony would be held and that his lie would be exposed, whereby he would be punished. He assumed that no matter what form it took, there would have been an opportunity for him to admit his wrongdoing. He hadn't imagined that there would not be one.

It had been the climb up the transparent steps and the comprehension of Tentei's ideas and meanings that was the so-called reception of the Tenchoku.

Now, Taiki felt that his crime had become more serious. He had not had an opportunity to make up for his mistake. On the other hand, Taiki understood the significance of the ruler.

His duties were extremely important. A ruler didn't just govern the kingdom; he existed to protect the kingdom. The ruler had to keep his kingdom's Onmyou in balance and judge the Hakke. The ruler's conduct and behavior will influence the direction of his kingdom's destiny.

Taiki looked up at his master, who was gazing silently and thoughtfully at the sea of clouds.

The ruler's very existence protected the kingdom and allowed the people to live peacefully.

Taiki suddenly became dizzy.

--Under this false king's rule, what course will the destiny of Tai Kingdom take?

6

Taiki's chest flooded with regret and despair as he watched Gyousou swear the oath.

--At that exact same time...

Tai Kingdom is located in the northeast part of the world. In its capital on the top of Kouki Mountain, there stood Hakkei Palace. Within the palace, Nisei Palace resided, from which a sound flowed out.

Nisei Palace is a small palace, in which the master of that palace lived with ten attendants who saw to the daily life of the master.

Inside Nisei Palace, a resounding call suddenly rang out. This sound came from the palace master: a Hakuchi, a White Pheasant.

"The White Pheasant has called out!" One of the attendants was full of joy, as he shouted while he ran outside of the palace. "It has made the First Sound!"

The attendant's voice reached everywhere and caused a great commotion. Before long, the entire royal palace was cheering.

In the White Pheasant's life, it only calls out twice, and these two sounds represent two different meanings. Because of this, the White Pheasant is also called Nisei, Two-Sounds.

The first time he cries out is called the "First Sound," and the second time is called the "Second Sound." A White Pheasant that finishes its second call immediately dies on the spot; thus, the Second Sound is also called the "Ending Sound."

The First Sound is "Sokui," ascension to the throne. The Second Sound is "Hougyo," the death of the ruler. The White Pheasant's entire life is for the sake of making these two calls.

The White Pheasant of Hakkei Palace was born ten years ago. Until today, it had not yet cried out.

--That is to say, this was its First Sound.

"The White Pheasant has called out! It has made the First Sound!"

The sound passed from the living quarters of the Inner Halls all the way to the governing offices of the Outer Halls. There wasn't a place where there were not continuous sounds of joy.

"King Tai has ascended to the throne!"

At the same time, in Gyouten, the capital city of the eastern Kei Kingdom, its own royal palace, Kinpa Palace also received the news.

"Open the door, Godou Palace!"

Hearing this, Keiki lifted his head up.

While laying on the floor, Keiki turned his head; Queen Kei, who had originally been listening to Keiki giving her the reports of the Rokkan, the Six Ministers, also looked up in curiosity.

A lady-in-waiting anxiously opened the window.

In an instant, a bird flew in from the window and rested on a gold-colored branch that was originally in the room already.

"The White Pheasant has called out!"

The master of Gudou Palace was a Hou, a Male Phoenix. Both a Hou and an Ou, a Female Phoenix, lived in Gudou Palace. The Hou could communicate with the Hou of other kingdoms, and the Ou called out when something important happened in another kingdom.

The Ou shouted loudly, "The First Sound has occurred in Tai Kingdom. King Tai has ascended to the throne."

Keiki held a steady gaze at the Ou, and the faintest smile rose to his face.

Queen Kei Jokaku saw the kirin of her kingdom reveal a smile that was hard to come by and was immediately dumbfounded.

It was after these things happened that Youka looked up into the sky while she was standing in the small paths in Houro Palace.

In the clear blue sky, looking from the summit of Mt. Hou to the northeast, she could see a line of auspicious clouds. It's just that Youka didn't know that that was actually the trail left behind by Genbu's flight across the sea of clouds.

Youka gazed at the clouds, lost in thought, while the few nyosen at her side did the same and watched the sky.

"Taiki..." She had never thought that that beloved child would leave them so soon.

That the festival was so short was a little regrettable, as the lonely seasons were coming to Mt. Hou.

--It could be a very long time until the next fruit of the kirin developed.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

1

The Kingdom of Tai is located in the northeast. Its capital is Kouki. Only a day and a night had passed when Genbu arrived at the top of Kouki Mountain, which rose high into the sky.

Genbu was actually a giant turtle about the size of a small island. Before Gyousou and Taiki left the temple, he had waited in the sea of clouds. He motioned to the master and servant to climb onto his shell by way of his head, which was resting on the shore and looked like a great crag. His shell felt like stone and was covered with countless rocky protrusions. He felt a lot like Mt. Hou. It was not known where Genbu came from. His neck and shell were not the slightest bit damp. In the middle of the shell, there was a very small palace hall. There was no one inside, as if it was there for a night's stay and rest.

In the journey of this turtle--it wouldn't be right if a boat--Hakkei Palace, the royal palace of Tai Kingdom had already begun preparing various items for the welcome of the king.

Taiki stood in the front part of the shell, and the first thing that entered his view was a steeply shaped small island. As they became closer, he discovered that on the horseshoe shaped island, along the bay, there were an unclear number of towering buildings.

The walls and the pillars and railings were all white. The blue of the roof was deeper than that of Houro Palace. The winds around the inlet were still and tranquil. The images reflecting off of the surface of the water looked from the air like a beautiful painting.

"That is Hakkei Palace. It is beautiful, is it not?"

A little lost in thought, Taiki nodded at the sound of Gyousou's voice.

"Those are the Outer Halls of the government. The ones on the other side should be the Inner Halls." Gyousou raised his hand and gestured.

"Kouri, when the time comes, you will live in Jinju Hall. It is over there." Gyousou pointed at a structure by the water.

"I'm living there too? Don't I serve you?"

"Yes, Kouri. Although it can be said that you are a minister, you are not like the other ministers. If we were to use a boat as an analogy for the kingdom, the ruler is the sail and the kirin is the anchor. One cannot be without the other."

"Yes..."

Genbu finally arrived at the inlet. A countless number of flags had been placed all around the royal palace. A great number of people were arranged neatly in front of the big structure, all prostrating on the ground. For the second time, Genbu rested his head on the shore to let the two disembark.

Passing through the prostrated crowd, the two people proceeded towards the palace in the front. They received the congratulations of the group of people, however Taiki was in a state of dismay.

Whether if it was those who knelt before him or those who served him, he had long gotten used to it. He was already accustomed to a life of luxury. The standard of the things prepared in the royal palace were far from that of Houro Palace.

He wanted badly to call Sanshi to come out and hold his hand. But Youka had already told him time and time again that when he chose a ruler and left the mountain for his home kingdom, he would be considered an adult. Sanshi no longer performed the role of his wet nurse, but that of a shirei. A shirei could not be called out in the midst of a crowd as he pleased.

Thus, only after an entire day of ceremony ended and after he returned to his room and let the curtains above his bed down was he able to really relax.

"Sanshi..."

Eight attendants lived in the room next door and satisfied Taiki's requests as necessary. So, he quietly called out Sanshi's name.

"Is everything all right?"

Every time Sanshi would immediately appear in front of Taiki, yet this time, he heard only her voice, but he didn't see her.

"Sanshi."

"You are already an adult. I cannot appear whenever you call me."

"You can't?" Taiki sat on a big blanket, though the blankets at Rosen Palace were much bigger than this.

"Although you cannot see me, I will always be by your side."

"But..."

"Goodnight."

Since this was all Sanshi said, there was nothing for Taiki to do but to lay down obediently, but he wasn't tired at all.

Suddenly, he smiled. He could feel two hands reach out from under the bedding with his fingers. He knew those were Sanshi's hands.

Sanshi's hands tightly held Taiki's hands

"...Goodnight."

"Hnn."

It was very hard for him to calmly close his eyes. He slept very shallowly. Even the dream he had was very clear in Taiki's mind. It had been a nightmare.

2

When a kirin arrived in his native kingdom, he assisted the ruler in governmental affairs in his position as Saiho. It didn't matter how old or young he was, the kirin could not avoid the responsibility he was born into.

Taiki had to begin playing the role of Saiho.

When the time came, he had to get out of bed and put on clothes that conformed with the protocol of his position; when the time came, he had to go to the Outer Halls and attend the Morning Council. After that, it was necessary for him to be present at the king's side and assist in government. For the time being, he could only sit at one side and listen, because that was the kirin's responsibility and duty.

After midday had passed and the afternoon's work was finished, the king would retire to his quarters. The Saiho could then also retire to his own room, but until Gyousou went to bed, he did not leave his side.

Currently, Gyousou's first order of business was to prepare for his own coronation ceremony.

On another side, he also had to formulate a new organization. Of the things that the previous king had left behind, the things that should be kept will be kept, and the things that should be discarded will be discarded. Other things like the appointments and dismissals of the ministers and the modifications of law are also quite important issues.

"How do you want to address the Daishi's complaints?"

Gyousou laid on a couch in his room as he looked over official documents. Taiki sat on the floor nearby.

"Pay no attention to him."

It was because the previous king was excessively extravagant that he eventually lost his way. Gyousou understood that for this reason, he had to reduce the number of those who served him to as few as possible. As a result, many attendants and court ladies did not have much to do. Even the palace halls not frequently used were locked up.

The Daishi was the head of the palace musicians. He complained that the king had dismissed too many musicians.

"I am a military man after all. I will simply tell him that I do not understand music."

"...But, it will also be difficult for those people who were dismissed..."

"Do you know how many musicians the previous king left behind?"

Taiki shook his head. "No."

"I do not know either. However, I am certain the number is extraordinarily high. It seemed like every time I went into the Inner Halls, a different piece of music would rise out of each palace hall. Also, there was never a break in the music over the course of an entire day. The musicians would play, regardless of whether or not the king was in the Inner Halls or not. We could even hear the music during the Morning Council."

"Is that so...?"

"The talented musicians in the palace should have no trouble finding other employment. We will keep a few of the best musicians here. After all, when there are guests visiting, we will want some music as to not be too improper."

"The Daishi says that there are too few musicians to perform at the coronation."

"It does not matter. In any case, Tai Kingdom is not extraordinarily wealthy."

"The Spring Minister also says that it is the coronation of the king after all. The production standards cannot be too low."

The Shunkanchou, the Spring Minister, was one of the Six Ministers. He oversaw ritual and ceremony.

"If people feel that it's inadequate, then we will let them. They are only those who put on airs. The previous king was wasteful. The treasury of the kingdom is empty. The warehouses are full of debt contracts."

"Yes..."

Taiki was young and did not yet understand the infrastructure of government, much less the arrangement of adult society. The current situation in Tai Kingdom was not very optimistic.

Contrary to what was going on, in regard to the ins and outs of the high officials in the Inner Halls, Gyousou didn't actually require Taiki's suggestions--Taiki himself was very clear on this.

"Do we need to find a completely new, suitable candidate for the position of Spring Minister?" Gyousou mumbled to himself as he glanced over official documents. Taiki watched him. "Because the previous king liked extravagant ceremonies, I worry that the current Spring Minister also favors an excessive style."

"...But, I don't think we need to replace him so quickly..."

Gyousou looked at Taiki and smiled. "You have a point. For the time being, we'll first observe the Spring Minister's performance."

Taiki lowered his head. Seeing Gyousou's smile, Taiki knew that it meant he had given in to Taiki.

"...I'm sorry. I've said too much..."

"There is no such thing. I should thank you for your questions, Taiki. They help me calm my mind."

Taiki knew that Gyousou was just saying these things to comfort him. "...I'm sorry..."

Seeing Taiki hanging his head, Gyousou stood up. "Kouri... What are you worrying about? Can you tell me?"

Hearing Gyousou ask this, Taiki hurriedly shook his head. "It's nothing."

Gyousou put down the documents he had been glancing over and suddenly embraced Taiki. "Is it that...you long for Mt. Hou?"

"That's not it..."

"If you miss the nyosen, just tell me. You are a little bit too polite."

"I don't..."

"Then...what is the reason you are so miserable? You do not have to say that it is nothing. You are still young. It is not necessary to force yourself to do this."

Taiki didn't know how to reply to this.

"When the coronation ceremony is over, I will send you immediately to Kei Kingdom, so that you can visit with Kei Taiho."

"That's not the reason either..."

"Or do you think that I am incompetent? That it makes you so uncomfortable to have given the kingdom to me?"

Taiki shook his head, even though that was not necessarily untrue. He felt as though it was his duty to watch over Gyousou. He didn't let Gyousou out of his sight for even a moment. It wasn't because he didn't trust in Gyousou's character; it was just that he was worried Gyousou might accidentally make an error in judgement.

--After all, there had been no revelation for Gyousou.

Gyousou looked at the child in his arms and saw a severe look on his face. In his mind, he secretly knit his brow.

What was it that was bothering Taiki so much? It did not seem as simple as that he just missed the nyosen. Or was it that he had suddenly taken on such a great responsibility? Or... When he thought back on it, after he had met Taiki for the first time at Mt. Hou, he wasn't sure if he was just being overly suspicious, but it seemed as if Taiki had become more and more anxious as the days passed by.

Gyousou set Taiki back on the floor.

"In conclusion, I would like you to rest thoroughly. There is no reason for you to accompany me until late at night."

"It's all right."

"I do not think it is all right. Do you realize how unhealthy your color is?"

"No... I..."

Gyousou placed his hand on the apprehensive child's head. "This is a command. Today, you may go back to your palace. For now, I am allowing that you do not need to leave your palace until the afternoon."

"Your majesty..."



"I promise you that before I make any sort of decision, I will discuss it with you first. Thus, for the time being, rest up a bit. Your response?"

Taiki looked at the floor. "Yes..."

3

Besides assisting the king, the Saiho's responsibility included another duty, which was that of the Shukou of Zui Province.

Jinju Hall was where Taiki lived, but at the same time, it was the seat of government for Zui Province. Ordinarily, he would use the short period of time in the afternoon to handle the affairs of government. Though this was the case, a kirin was part of the king's division, so in reality, the rule of Zui Province was still under the control of the king.

Now, after receiving the Tenchoku, he knew just the slightest bit about governing a kingdom, but other than that, most of the time, he actually understood very little about what was said. In fact, his handling of government affairs only involved him listening silently to the reports of the officials and asking questions about things he didn't understand. He spent a majority of his time in study.

When Gyousou had time, he would visit Jinju Hall. Occasionally, he would interrupt and say something or he would watch Taiki from the side. Afterwards, when Gyousou returned to the Inner Halls in order to continue his own work, he would steadfastly prevent Taiki from following him back. At this, having no alternative, Taiki would then spend much of the afternoon in his own palace hall idling.

At first, there were eight people here attending to Taiki. After the drastic reduction in personnel, there were left only two. Considering that in the past, Taiki had spent most of his time with nyosen, the remaining two were both court ladies. This point was probably Gyousou's meticulous arrangement. For dinner, Gyousou did not forget to find Taiki to eat with, which also showed that Gyousou was thinking of Taiki.

Taiki took everything that Gyousou did to heart. On the other hand, Taiki felt even more like he couldn't take it easy. The better Gyousou treated Taiki, the more Taiki felt like he was being forced into a corner.

On another afternoon of continuous sighing, Taiki was suddenly called on by Gyousou, who had returned to the Inner Halls.

Taiki rushed hurriedly to the Inner Halls--at this time, there were only a few days left before the auspicious day of the coronation ceremony.

"Taiho, you have a guest visiting." There was a visitor room that was used to receive guests from other kingdoms. Gyousou stood in this room on the other side of the open door.

It was rare for him to address Taiki as Taiho in a large crowd of people, and after Gyousou turned his head back, Taiki could see a devious smirk on his face.

"A guest...?" What sort of guest could it be? Taiki cocked his head and tried to figure it out. Suddenly, he sensed something around him.

He felt like something was nearby in his periphery. He looked around carefully again and caught sight of one faintly-glowing, golden bubble floating around. The bubble looked as if it was being pulled along by a very light and thin sash, floating up and down.

Taiki's heart began to race. Could it be the visitor he was thinking of...?

He ran into the room. The person standing inside made Taiki's eyes light up. "...Kei Taiho!"

Keiki smiled a little and then respectfully nodded to him. "I'm very happy to see that you have descended the mountain and arrived at Tai Kingdom without any trouble."

Taiki stopped running. He didn't dare to look directly at Keiki's face. "Th...thank you..."

Keiki looked on with surprise at the child who was hiding his face. He couldn't help but be suspicious of Taiki's change. He understood now why Gyousou had specifically asked for him to come.

It was basic etiquette to avoid as much as possible a visit before his enthronement; furthermore, rulers and kirin actually have very little involvement with other kingdoms. In reality, those who had a friendship with Keiki were only those who had helped him when he went in search of his ruler. They were King En and Enki from the neighboring kingdom.

Gyousou was an important official of the previous king. There was no reason for him not to know these customs. For him to break past conventions and especially invite Keiki for this meeting, it was not hard to understand his reason.

"You see? It's like I had said previously. I am the first to come and see you. Are you still doing well?"

"Yes."

The expression on Taiki's lowered face was grave. Even when he raised his head, there wasn't even a glimmer of joy in his eyes.

"But I don't feel that you are... Did you encounter some situation that has made you worry?"

"No..."

Gyousou knitted his brow as he watched the two and suddenly interrupted, saying, "I think that the two of you should have much to say to each other. I will ask to be excused for the time being."

Keiki nodded in respect. Taiki could only do as Keiki had done and nodded to Gyousou.

Following this, Gyousou probably returned to all that complicated work that was waiting for him. Taiki knew very well in his mind that even had he asked to go with Gyousou, Gyousou would not have permitted it. Moreover, today, a

guest had arrived.

Gyousou lowered his head lightly and immediately exited. After Keiki saw Gyousou leave, he turned toward Taiki and said, "Would you like to take me to the garden for a walk?"

"Okay... But...I don't really know where it is."

"Are you telling me that you have been so busy that you haven't had a chance to stroll around?"

Taiki stopped his hand as it was about to open the door to the garden. He didn't know how to respond to Keiki.

4

"The wind in Tai Kingdom is very cold." In the garden of the Inner Halls, there was an enormous pond. Keiki stood at the water's edge. "Would you like to sit for a bit?"

After he said this, he looked behind at the trembling Taiki.

There was a magnificent pavilion nearby that amazed anyone who looked upon it. It was built by the previous King Tai, and whether it was the floor or the pillars, it was all made of crystal. Around the pond, there had been plans to create pavilions in the same design with smoke crystal, yellow crystal, red crystal and purple crystal. The four pavilions were in the middle of building, when the previous king died and construction was halted. It had been neglected up until the present time.

"Gems are produced in Tai Kingdom... It's no wonder there hasn't been a way to stop the internal turmoil." Keiki touched one of the giant pillars made out of crystals.

The climate of Tai Kingdom is bad; no one is willing to plant crops. However, in Tai Kingdom there are countless gem springs, and so the people can be considered fairly wealthy. As the name suggests, they are springs that can produce precious gems. All one has to do is place into the spring a gem as if it were a seed, and it will grow into a giant crystal. In Tai Kingdom, gold springs and silver springs are also quite common.

"For one this big, it probably took at least thirty year's time to produce."

It is said that there is nothing left in the treasury of the kingdom.

Even under the rule of such a king, the authority of the government was able to continue for over a hundred years. It was probably due to the fact that he didn't muddle together his pleasure with the business of government. The old king had a group of attendants and court ladies that he had fun with, but he didn't thusly promote these people and give them official positions, nor did he allow them to participate in the governing of the kingdom.

"Are you lacking something?" Keiki looked at Taiki, who was silently standing at one side.

"No..."

"Tai Taiho, what's bothering you?"

"Nothing..." Taiki's responses were as if he was thinking aloud. His expression was as severe as before. Keiki got the feeling that Taiki was not telling him the truth.

"I've heard King Tai say that you've subdued a shirei."

"Yes."

"And that you can transform."

"...Yes."

"It is regrettable."

Taiki looked back at Keiki uncertainly. There was only a self-deprecating smile on Keiki's face.

"I came to see you as we had agreed. I thought that you would be happy to see me."

Taiki lowered his head.

"It really is too bad."

His calm voice stabbed Taiki in the heart.

He was finally meeting with someone he had wanted to see, but he couldn't bring himself to be happy about it. He felt miserable.

Regardless of who it was, even if it was a court lady, he would feel ashamed and not be able to look at them directly. He really didn't know when he would be able to sleep peacefully, or when his conscience would stop torturing him, or when he would be able to hold a proper conversation with someone.

--This is my punishment. Until my crime is exposed, I will suffer without end. Taiki knew that he didn't have the right to cry, but the tears came flowing out anyway.

"Taiki..." Keiki reached out and placed Taiki's hands on his knees, and then gently stroked his head. Taiki took the opportunity to rest his head on Keiki's knees.

"What has happened?" Keiki's voice was without intonation; his words were full of calm.

"...Taiho...have you ever regretted being a kirin?"

"I haven't."

"...Then...have you ever regretted the selection of your ruler?"

"No."

Taiki looked up. "But, I heard that things weren't the happiest between Kei Taiho and Queen Kei."

"Who did you hear that from?"

"The nyosen, they..."

Keiki sighed. Queen Kei had now completely given up on the affairs of government. She had lost her ruling platform and the kingdom's political situation was in great disorder. The lords looked down on the queen, and the officials were

even more tyrannical.

"I have already sworn a vow. I have devoted my life to her, and I cannot abandon her. No matter where my queen goes, even if she does not want me to, I must follow her regardless."

--However, the problem was that the hardship that came from following her was difficult to endure.

Taiki looked at Keiki with his deep black eyes, and then moved his line of sight back toward the ground.

"...If only I could be as certain about things as you, how nice that would be."

"Taiki, do you feel regret?"

Hearing Keiki ask this so plainly, Taiki felt a little flustered.

"Yes..."

Keiki simply tilted his head and didn't say a thing. There wasn't any expression on his face either.

At this point, Taiki couldn't hide it any longer.

"I...have done something so wrong there's no saving me." The little kirin lifted his head, and his expression was that of despair. "I...didn't receive a revelation for the king..."

Keiki was so surprised he didn't know what to say. Taiki's confession was far from anything he had imagined.

"No...revelation?"

Taiki nodded. "There wasn't any sort of sign. I didn't see any kind of ouki either. At one time, I had even told him that I wished him well, that he wasn't the one."

"...Why did you?"

"At the time...I really didn't want to be separated from Gyousou." The child who was staring down, lifted his head up and looked at Keiki.

"What...should I do?" The hands that had grabbed onto Keiki's knees were trembling slightly. "What should I do to fix my mistake? How do I make up for this?"

"Taiki..."

"It's all fake! What's going to happen? Will Tai Kingdom be destroyed? Will the king be punished? When everyone finds out about this, what will the response from the Heavens and the people be?" Taiki's tears flowed continuously.

Keiki was about to say something, but in the end, he closed his mouth. He lightly patted the hands at his knees and then stood up. Sitting on the floor of the pavilion, Taiki looked up at him. Keiki nodded in respect. "I'm not sure what to say... For today, I will bid you farewell."

Taiki hugged his knees as he sat in the corner of the pavilion and watched the golden hair getting farther and farther away.

Was Keiki disappointed in him? He would probably never want to see him again.

Was this going to become rumor? Or was his deception going to be revealed?

--When the time came, how would Gyousou deal with Taiki's betrayal?

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

1

When Keiki called upon Taiki again, a couple days had already passed.

It also seemed as though he hadn't informed Gyousou of the matter regarding the revelation, because on that same day during dinner, he hadn't noticed any change in Gyousou's mood. Taiki couldn't help but sigh in relief, though on the other hand, he also couldn't avoid feeling disappointed.

As he was spending his time in the afternoon worried like he had been before, a messenger came from the Inner Halls and requested that he change into formal dress and go to the visitor room. Therefore, Taiki hurriedly made his way to the Inner Halls and discovered Gyousou and Keiki waiting with him, along with two other people.

The man sitting in the center of the room looked of a similar age to Gyousou. It also seemed like this person was a very important guest. Standing at the man's side was a youth who was probably a little older than Taiki.

Like Keiki, the youth had a head of golden hair, which appeared to shine and give off a faint, golden glow--or at least that's how it looked to Taiki's eyes. There was also a similar golden glow emanating around Keiki; perhaps this was the so-called kirin spirit. From this, Taiki had guessed that the youth was some kingdom's kirin.

--He could now see the spirit of kirin.

After Taiki paid his respects at the entrance, he looked at Gyousou. There wasn't anything surrounding Gyousou that he would call ouki.

He walked inside and knelted down, waiting for further instructions. Keiki motioned for him to come closer. "I have brought King En and En Taiho for a visit."

Taiki opened his eyes widely.

(King En...)

It was not hard to understand why Gyousou was sitting in a lower position.

Taiki knelt upon the floor and lightly bowed his head. According to custom, when facing a ruler, one must bow very respectfully. One must be kneeling with both hands on the ground and with his forehead to the floor. However, for only kirin, it's necessary simply to gently bow one's head.

"Ah... How do you do?" Taiki knew very clearly how to pay his respects, but he didn't know what sorts of

pleasantries he should say in these situations, so he just said as he did.

Gyousou whispered to Taiki, "Kouri, you must kowtow."

"Eh...?" Taiki looked at Gyousou disconcertedly.

"The length of King En's reign is only second to that of King Sou. We cannot treat him the same way as the other rulers."

"But..."

Taiki looked in dismay at the other two kirin, and whether it was Keiki or Enki, neither of them contradicted Gyousou's words.

"Yes... Excuse me."

Taiki hastened to put his hands on the floor and lowered his head again.

Just as he was preparing to bow down and touch his forehead to the floor, he stopped in halfway through the action.

"What is it?" asked King En, who was sitting in front of him.

"Nothing," replied Taiki. He tried once more to lower his head, but he stopped halfway down, like before.

--It wasn't possible.

"What is it? Does the Kirin of Tai Kingdom have something against En?"

"No." Taiki looked for help, but all he saw was Gyousou's face becoming grim.

"Taiki, what are you doing?" asked Gyousou harshly. Taiki had only to try again.

He could only lower his head halfway, and then it wouldn't go any further. No matter how hard he tried, he could not get past his elbow. It was as if there was something solid in that distance; no amount of effort allowed him to move. Besides not being able to kowtow, he was also unable to bend his arms.

"Oh...? It looks like you really do have something against us."

King En's voice sounded very cold. Taiki hastily looked up at him.

"No...!"

Standing at King En's side, Enki said frostily, "You can't even show the least bit of etiquette? There's no reason for King En to personally come to Tai Kingdom. It was at Kei Taiho's request that King En made this special trip, all to receive this rude treatment?"

With a caustic smile, King En said, "This is the first time a new kirin has shown me such disrespect. It seems like Taiki dislikes En. Or is it...that King Tai ordered him to do this? Has he forbid you to compliment me?"

"Never..."

Taiki saw only solemn faces around him; no one was willing to offer him a helping hand.

"If that isn't the case, then I'd like to hear you explain it to me. If you can't give me a reason and don't bow to me, then I will take this as a sign of hostility from Tai towards En!"

"Taiki!" From Gyousou came a reprimand.

Taiki hurriedly tried once more to kowtow, but there was simply no way for him to lower his head. He couldn't shorten his distance to the floor at all. He didn't know why his body wouldn't listen to his mind.

Taiki started to sweat, not because he was anxious, but because this was laborious. One by one, droplets of sweat hit the floor. Even his breathing became hard to do.

King En stood up. Out of the corners of his eyes, Taiki discovered that he was walking towards him.

"What is it? Can't you even pretend to pay me respect?"

Just as this voice fell above his head, his hair was grasped. King En was now pushing down on him with a terrible force.

"As it is, all you have to do is lower your head. Surely it can't be that hard?"

Taiki himself could not say why he was resisting his power. He knew he couldn't withstand King En, but his entire body began enduring his might.

"So stubborn..." Saying this, King En began pushing harder.

Suddenly, that pressure disappeared.

"That's enough!"

Hearing the sound of a crisp slap, Taiki realized that the feeling of his hair being grasped disappeared. He looked up to see Enki knocking away King En's hand.

"How can you do this to a child? Taiki, are you okay?"

Taiki took deep breaths as he looked confusedly at Enki.

"Ah... You're so pale... Can you stand up? Do you want to lie down?"

Enki didn't mind using his sleeves to wipe the sweat off of Taiki's face. Keiki held Taiki up, for whom standing was not easy.

"Are you all right? Sit down for a little bit..."

At this moment, King En was a little stunned and a little interested as he watched Taiki and the others.

"It's so heartwarming to see such love between members of the same type..."

"You moron! You're the one who went too far! An idiot like you, you were a complete bastard!"

Taiki stared absentmindedly at the three.

"I knew you were reckless, but I didn't think you could be this rash!"

"You were the ones who suggested it..."

"I didn't ask you to abuse him like this!"

"There are limits to everything!"

Both Keiki and Enki relentlessly yelled at Enki, who shrank back.

"Then...?"

King En smiled at Taiki as he was about to ask a question, and said, "Do you understand?"

Taiki didn't have a chance to ask any questions.

"Kirin cannot swear false oaths."

Enki knocked King En roughly on the head, and the latter's expression became much softer.

"Don't say it as if you can see from the king's position!"



2

The wind blew across the terrace. Taiki sat in a chair and Keiki knelt in front of him, their eyes at exactly the same level.

"I'm very sorry. I wasn't clear enough before." He gently took Taiki's hand. "When you asked me about what the revelation was, I should have explained it to you better. I had no idea that it would have caused you so much hardship. Please forgive me."

"Taiho... I..."

"The revelation doesn't take any sort of shape." Keiki smiled. "It's impossible to explain the revelation in words, because nothing really happens, Taiki."

Taiki looked directly at Keiki. "Nothing...?"

Keiki also looked directly at Taiki and nodded. "That's right. The ruler has ouki. However, ouki isn't something you can see."

"It's not like a light?"

Since the time that Keiki had told Taiki that the kirin spirit was a glow, Taiki kept thinking that the ouki would appear like this as well.

"The ouki might feel like a light, or it might feel like a darkness. The ouki might also be a burst of ambition. On the other hand, it might also be something that makes you feel safe."

"So, the ouki doesn't take a set form?"

"Actually, it's very hard to describe it in words."

"But...Kei Taiho, didn't you say before that you used the ouki to find your ruler?"

"Yes. If the ruler isn't far away, you can feel it very obviously. Then you will know what direction the ruler should be in."

"What direction..." Taiki thought back. Before the mountain-climbers gathered at Hoto Palace, how often did he get that feeling? That overwhelming sensation, if he had to say it, had been a scary and overpowering feeling.

"When you encounter the ruler, then you'll know exactly where that feeling is coming from. You'll have a vague sense that it is the same kind of spirit."

"...And that's what ouki is?"

"Yes. The ouki is a very clear feeling. This sort of feeling is very different compared to that of other people. It's something you can't see, and something that is impossible to explain in words."

Taiki gently balled his hands into fists. Keiki comfortingly patted his hands.

"The revelation is much the same way. Nothing will specifically happen. If I had to express it in words, I'd call it an intuition. When you meet your ruler, you will have that kind of intuition, Taiki."

"Intuition..."

Keiki nodded. "I'll be honest with you. When I met Queen Kei, I knew for certain that it was her. But at the same time, in my mind I knew that she wasn't someone who was suitable to be queen. I also knew that in order for her to become a good and wise ruler, I had to make many sacrifices, and at the same time, I had to have a strong perseverance, all to make up for the things that she was not good at."

"Really...?"

"I knew that she was not right for this, but I could not defy her. Instinct had told me that I couldn't resist the revelation. Even if you hated them, there's no way for a kirin to refuse. Because that is what the Heavens have decided."

A pair of hands were placed on Taiki's shoulders. He looked up and saw a smiling Gyousou.

Gyousou knew now. He had already been told Taiki's confession.

"The selection that a kirin makes, that is the revelation, Taiki."

3

"I..." Taiki finally felt a heavy burden lifting from his heart. "The first time I met Lord Gyousou, I was really scared..."

"Yes."

"Before Lord Gyousou climbed the mountain, I kept having this feeling...as if something scary would come from the Reikon Gate..."

Had Taiki not felt fear initially, but instead a light, a hopefulness, or a more obvious sensation, perhaps Taiki would not have been so lost.

"I knew in my heart that he wasn't the sort of person who did frightening things, but I was afraid of him anyways. I also knew that he was a good, amazing person, but I was still scared."

"I see."

"Sometimes, I was really scared of him, but whenever I thought about meeting him, I felt really happy, and when I knew that I wouldn't see him, I would feel lonely. That's why when I heard that he was leaving Mt. Hou, I felt so terrible inside."

Keiki nodded. "But that's a very good thing. There isn't a kirin who feels sadness when he is by his ruler's side, and on the opposite side, there isn't a kirin who won't be unhappy when he is away from his ruler. A ruler and his kirin are inseparable."

"Yes..."

"A kirin is only a vehicle through which the Will of the Heavens is expressed. In other words, a kirin does not have his own intentions; very simply, we pass on the intentions of the Heavens."

Taiki nodded, and Keiki rubbed his head. It was a warm hand. Taiki was also very happy that he could finally receive Keiki's affection now.

"Taiki, you said that you were afraid of Lord Gyousou. I think I can understand the reason for your fear."

"What is it?"

"You shouldn't call that feeling 'fear.' It might be more appropriate to call it 'awe.'"

"Perhaps..."

"Because, Taiki, you met your destiny. So that's why you felt such awe."

Taiki looked hesitantly at Gyousou. When he saw Gyousou's eyes, he thought that Keiki was probably right about everything.

"Taiki cannot tell a lie. That's just how kirin are--they are a creature who cannot bow to anyone but their own rulers. Thus, you chose the right person for king."

"Yes..."

Keiki looked at the small kirin's deep black eyes. "Had I known earlier, I would have made this more clear. Then you wouldn't have felt such regret. At the time, I should have stayed on Mt. Hou for longer. Had I done that, Taiki wouldn't have been so anxious... I truly am very sorry."

"No! It's my fault for not asking about it earlier."

Keiki heard these very Taiki-like words and couldn't help but smile. "From the bottom of my heart, I offer my congratulations."

"Thank you."

He finally saw Taiki smile.

Keiki turned to look at Gyousou, who was standing close to Taiki. After Keiki passed Taiki's confession to Gyousou, he had not been the least bit distressed, nor had he looked disappointed. Even more, he had never said anything blaming Taiki. He had just looked sternly at Keiki and asked him if he really was the king.

"I would also like to congratulate King Tai."

"I thank you." Gyousou smiled.

King En also wished Gyousou well. "En offers its congratulations as well."

"Many thanks."

"When will you come for another duel?"

"Do you still remember?"

"How could I forget? Long ago, I lost one fight to you. --At that time, I'd felt that you were an extraordinary person, but who would have thought that after so many years, you'd become a king?"

Gyousou smiled as he said, "Are you still willing to be my opponent?"

"We are colleagues. Shall we set a time?"

"King Tai," interrupted Enki, who was sitting on the banister of the terrace, admiring the view. "By the way, what is that weird thing over there?"

Enki pointed to a pavilion across from the terrace.

King En put on a serious face. "Don't speak so rudely. I'm sorry for his behavior."

Gyousou laughed, showing that he didn't mind. He looked at the youth and said, "That is a remnant left behind by the previous king. I plan to tear it down in order to buy grain to supplement the treasury of the kingdom. King En, do you have a surplus of grain over there?"

"King Tai, you're in luck!" Enki laughed. "In our kingdom, there have been plentiful harvests in these past few years. We're worried that the prices will fall because of this."

Taiki smiled as he watched the others conversing. Keiki jiggled Taiki's hand. "Would you like to take me to your gardens and stroll around? We didn't finish last time I was here."

"Okay. But I really don't know it very well."

The youth that was sitting on the banister jumped down. "Well, then let's go explore!"

Taiki looked up at Gyousou. "May I go?"

"You may. But you must come back in the evening. Though it will be simple, we must still have a banquet tonight for our guests."

"All right."

Keiki extended his hand, and Taiki took it without the slightest bit of hesitation.

"Would you like me to call Hankyo and Jakko out?"

"Can you?" Taiki looked up at Keiki.

Keiki laughed. "We are all kirin, so it doesn't matter. Taiki, call your shirei out as well, and let us see them."

"Yes!"

## EPILOGUE

"After his majesty sits on the throne, you kowtow to him again. The entire process is just like this." The Spring Minister continuously reminded Taiki, who then nodded.

"Yes."

The coronation ceremony had finally arrived.

The stage was the main hall of the government, at the foot of Kouki Mountain in the capital city of Kouki.

In front of the main hall there was an expansive square, which was filled with people. The purpose of the coronation ceremony was to announce to the other kingdoms and to the people that a new ruler was ascending to the throne.

After the ceremony started, one could hear cheers coming from the outside. There was no one who wasn't joyous about the enthronement of a new ruler.

The day before, Taiki had left Hakkei Palace for the first time and gone down to the streets of Kouki. He encountered the attendants whom Gyousou had parted with at Mt. Hou, and who had returned by land route, and of course, he saw Keito, with whom he had traveled with. Other than that, he also met up with Risai, who had come to Kouki for a visit as an aide to the Shukou of Jou Province for the coronation ceremony, as well as Hien.

Risai and Gyousou also took a quick trip around Zui Province.

Taiki was astonished to discover that Kouki Mountain was even taller than he had imagined. He avoided the eyes and ears of the people to wander the streets and saw things as amazing as the waters of the gem springs. From start to finish, everything was completely new to Taiki, as he looked at everything wide-eyed.

"Did you sleep well last night?" asked Gyousou of Taiki, as Taiki's court ladies were helping him straighten out his clothes.

"Yes, because I was so tired, I fell asleep right when I hit the bed."

"Very good."

"I might have been sleeping too well. I've pretty much forgotten all those words of congratulations that I had memorized before..." Taiki said this very candidly, which made Gyousou laugh.

"In any case, I will be the only one who can hear you."

"Or perhaps even Lord Gyousou won't be able to hear me."

Taiki tilted his head to listen to the noise coming from outside. Gyousou did the same, and smiled as he did so.

"You have a point."

He didn't know why, but Taiki couldn't sit calmly in his seat. Thus, he was pacing endlessly in his antechamber, all the while reciting the words the Spring Minister had taught him. He suddenly heard someone calling him.

"Hey, kid!"

Taiki quickly turned his head. "En Taiho!"

The nearby court ladies rushed to bow to Enki. Enki gently waved his hand to stop them.

"I'm here to see my good neighbor."

Gyousou smiled wryly and responded, "Thank you for coming. I am sorry for the inconvenience."

"Yes, thank you, En Taiho. Where's King En?"

"At the banquet for honored guests. He's almost drunk... Are you nervous?"

"A little..." Taiki replied honestly.

Enki's face seemed to say, 'Oh, well!' as he smiled and said, "You really are timid! And you're so small, too."

Gyousou didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Kouri is still only ten years old."

Enki knitted his brow. "I was curious about this before. Your name is very interesting."

Taiki blushed a little. "Actually, my name is Kouri, without the grass radical."

"I see..."

"Oh, that's right! I heard that En Taiho was also born in Hourai. What was your name?"

"Rokuta. I don't have a surname, because my status was not high enough."

Taiki tilted his head. It seemed like it had been a long time since everyone had a surname. Could it be that the Kirin of En has lived a long while? "When were you born?"

Enki glanced at the ceiling. "500 years before you!"

"Huh!?"

In the capital, flags fluttered about. To the common people, who were already weary of the extravagance of the previous king, the simple coronation ceremony was even more favorable.

Beside the throne stood a child. His hair color was hard to come by, but because of where he was, it would not be wrong to assume that he was the kirin.

A wise elder explained that Taiki was a black kirin. Though he wasn't clear on what sort of special characteristics a black kirin possessed, he had heard that they were very rare creatures. The people of the square were all filled with pride.

From on top of the platform, Taiki looked down at the thunderous multitude. He was a little bit afraid, and yet there was no feeling of guilt as they gazed upon him, and this made him happy.

Under such great and eager anticipation, Gyousou stepped onto the platform. The square boiled over with cheering and applause.

Gyousou calmly sat upon the throne. Taiki walked towards him and kneeled down.

Without any difficulty, Taiki bowed his head, and pressed his forehead onto Gyousou's shoes. The thing he wasn't able to do with King En was now exceptionally easy. He didn't feel any sort of discomfort as he carried out his duty. His heart filled with joy.

The tightly packed crowd of people once more rose up in thunderous applause.

--Taiou sokui! King Tai has ascended to the throne!

In Taikyokukoku, the Far Kingdom of Tai, a new dynasty has begun!

In the spring of the twenty-second year of Wagen, the Saiho suffered Shitsudou and thereafter died. Within a month, the king passed away and was posthumously called Kyouou, the Extravagant King. The Taiou had reigned for one-hundred and twenty-four years, and was interred at Souryou upon Tappisan.

In the first month of the same year, the Ranka of Tai appeared on Houzan. Within a few days, a shoku struck Gozan. The Taika was separated from its branch and disappeared. A hundred shin and a thousand sen searched everywhere for it.

In the first month of the thirty-second year, the Kokki returned to Houzan. Yellow flags fluttered across the world. In the summer, Saku Gyousou entered Koukai by way of the Reikonmon, climbed Houzan, and accepted the oath of Taiki. He was entered into the Shinseki and was then called Taiou.

Gyousou, original surname Boku, given name Sou, was a man of Garyou. He achieved the rank of Kingun Shougun, and was stationed in Sakuken of Zuishu. He received the Will of the Heavens and ascended to the throne. The era of Koushi was proclaimed. The dynasty of the Sakuou began.

--*Taishi Sakusho (The History of Tai, Book of Saku)*

## AFTERWORD TO VOLUME TWO

I don't know when it started, but there's been a *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* boom... I already said that in the previous volume. I am that Ono who has already written until she doesn't know what else to write, and is afraid of writing afterwords.

After my previous book, *Shadow of the Moon, Sea of the Shadow*, was published, I received a question from many readers: "Could it be that you didn't plan on writing a series?" Thank you very much. For the time being, I intend to write a series. In addition, there are preparations, and to that extent, with the support of the readers-sama, I will keep writing... If only that were the recent publishing situation. Oh, relentless world...

In brief, I'll try my best to write as much as I can. I also ask everyone for lots of advice.

Since I aim to write a series, I regret that my writing speed is too slow. I've thought about it very carefully. If I were to write a book a month...in an instant, the series would also be completed, and following that, I'd have to start a new story... It's easy to say five books or ten books, but when I work it out, I'll have to spend many years' time. When I think about that, I can only put it aside with a "tohoho." However, for those readers waiting for my next work, I feel so



helpless... I will be diligent.

The speed of my writing is already slow; if I didn't have the help of a word processor, the situation would be even more dire. I can't even imagine that. If there were no word processors in the world, I don't think there would have appeared such an author called Ono. So, I must really thank our home's old-boned 98-kun (also called Zorac-kun) that I still whip around, and the support it gives me.

That's right, the Zorac we have at home is already an old soldier. We often think about getting a newer, faster machine, but because I've saved so many definitions in the old machine, this isn't a problem that can be solved with a new computer and new software. For instance, when I type 'kuji' for the 'nine words,' it will appear as 'Rin Byou Tou Sha Kai Jin Retsu Zai Zen' instead of 'Rin Byou Tou Sha Kai Jin Retsu Zen Kyou.' And if I take into account the fact that this story is a series, the more I write, the more strange words will be added. I wonder how many megabytes the dictionary will be a year from now... Hmmmm...

Since I wrote the previous book, I often hear people saying, "Even the second standard set of kanji aren't enough to use." But JIS-2 unexpectedly served its purpose. Just when I was praising its performance, for the first time there was a character that couldn't be found in the second standard set of kanji. Just thinking about simply organizing the already enormous dictionary and then all the words that I've added, makes my head spin.

...If I keep talking like this, people are going to think that I'm a computer otaku. I should say first that I am definitely not a person with extensive knowledge. I may want to be an otaku, but I just don't have enough time. Just dealing with the word processor on the Zorac (with its attached communications function) already keeps me busy. I'm very, very sorry.

Oh, yes, speaking of communications, I should talk about the SF forum at NIF. Thanks for the encouragement you guys gave me last year. When the vote for the best was going on, you guys especially wrote a commentary that made a timid person like me speechless. In my own consistent way of doing things, I very gratefully received the responses in the conference hall. I must take this opportunity to extend my gratitude to you. Thank you very, very much!

Oh my, in the end, this afterword has turned into miscellany that has nothing to do with the work it follows.

Honestly, I don't really like saying this and that about my own work. I always feel like, no matter how I say it, everything turns out sounding like an excuse. So, I think I'll wait and be ready for everyone's impressions. Even if it's just a little bit, I'll be happy.

--Ono Fuyumi