



THE FLAYED MAN

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: HUSKS 1 OF 6

My first look at the other side of the world was of a girl kneeling beside a corpse.

They were just outside the conjuring circle we'd appeared inside. The boss and I turned back to back, scanning the room for movement as our eyes adjusted after the white flash of teleportation. The boss drew his sword. The big knife was already in my hand. Beside us, Arnisant tensed but remained silent. In just a few months, the boss had him trained well. Better than me, he liked to say. Funny guy, the boss.

A closed sliding panel door was the only exit. Except for the flicker of light from huge candles in each corner, nothing stirred.

The boss went to the corpse. I went to the girl. That's pretty much the difference between us.

The dead guy had to be our host, a Pathfinder named Yamana Hisao. I figured the girl for his daughter or a servant.

"Come here, kid." She looked up, and I realized she was not a child but a tiny young woman. When she saw my face, she said a few quick foreign words.

"Help me out here, boss."

"Hm?" One of his hands came away bloody from the corpse. "Of course."

He plucked a raffle scroll from one of the little holsters on his belt and thumbed a spell at me. My nose tickled. I suppressed a sneeze until the feeling passed.

"You all right, miss?"

"I am unharmed." Her words were perfectly understandable with the spell on my tongue.

"What's your name?"

She glanced back down at the corpse until I took her hands and pulled her up. In this light I should have passed for human, but she shuddered at my touch. "I am Kazuko, Yamana's housekeeper."

Her eyes and hair were black. Her skin was the color of seashells except for her flushed cheeks. The top of her head barely reached my chin, which made her tiny compared to Chelish women.

"Well, Kazuko, you're safe now. I'm Radovan. This is the count. He's good at sorting out this sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?"

"Mysteries."

Count Varian Jeggare was half a head taller than me and slim as a rapier. Like me, he was not fully human, but his half-elven ancestry made the girls flutter, not flinch. If he had half my charm and rugged good looks, he'd be a lady-killer.

The boss returned the corpse to its original position, slumped facedown over its left arm. He tugged a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and wiped the blood from his fingers.

"Is there anyone else in the house?" he asked Kazuko. He didn't need a spell to communicate. The boss collected languages the way he collected books.

"No, honorable sir."

"Wait here," he said. "Come, Arnisant." The hound took his place just behind his master's left heel. The boss plucked another raffle scroll from his belt and stepped out of the room.

I showed Kazuko the little smile. "How long you been keeping house for Yamana?"

She kept her eyes on the floor. "Almost ten months. I assisted his former housekeeper while she was with child. Since she gave birth, I have worked alone."

"You live here?"

"No," she said. "Usually I am home at this hour, but tonight Master Yamana asked me to attend his guests."

"That'd be us. He good to work for?"

"Yamana was kind and generous to all of his servants."

"You can't think of anyone who'd want to hurt him?"

Kazuko considered the question. "Yamana had no enemies."

She seemed more shy than evasive, but her eyes told me she understood I was interrogating her.

"What do you know about Pathfinders?"

"Yamana was one, but he no longer traveled. Sometimes he provided information for colleagues visiting Oda. He bought this house from a fellow conjurer and maintained this room as a place where Pathfinders could transport their colleagues from distant lands."

That information jibed with what little I knew of Yamana and our reason for being here. We'd left Absalom

in a hurry after the Decemvirate, the boss's bosses, had summoned him to some secret meeting. Whatever they'd discussed, it made him mad as hell. When he's irritated, he complains for hours. When he's furious, his lips turn white and he speaks in ordinary sentences instead of his usual floral arrangements.

The boss had sent me to fetch supplies before returning to the Pathfinder headquarters in Absalom. It was all high ceilings and arches until we arrived at the summoning chamber, a hollow granite cube. There, a tall masked man—at least, I think it was a man under all those robes—stared daggers at the boss until a portly woman arrived to cast the spell that sent us here.

Loud voices outside interrupted my reverie. The law had arrived.

Kazuko led me through a few chambers of wooden frames and paper windows. The boss and Arnisant joined us at the front door, and together we stepped out into a garden lit only by the waxing moon. The Decemvirate's conjurer had teleported us from Absalom in the middle of the afternoon, but here on the other side of the world it was past midnight. Thinking how far we'd traveled and whether we'd gone across Golarion, through it, or neither made me dizzy. I put it out of my mind.

Outside the gate stood three men, two tidy guards and their shabby-looking commander. The tallest of them was still an inch or two shorter than me. The guards stiffened at the sight of Arnisant.

The commander made a short bow. His men bowed a couple inches deeper.

The boss murmured in Taldane, "Return the gesture. Lower than the leader, but higher than his men."

I did that, but the boss himself barely nodded. The commander noticed the pecking order and accepted it as his cue.

"Takeda Yoshio of the eleventh precinct of Oda city, inspector second class."

"Count Varian Jeggare of Imperial Cheliox, venture-captain of the Pathfinder Society, and invited guest of my late colleague, the honorable Yamana Hisao."

Takeda bowed again, this time slightly lower. His men did the same, but their eyes flicked between Arnisant and me. I tipped them a wink to give them something to think about.

Kazuko led us back into the house. At the threshold, one of Takeda's men pulled a face as the hound followed. All three constables looked at me like I should do something about it. The boss noticed the exchange and gave me a discreet Pathfinder hand sign. I showed Arnisant an obvious signal for "stay," and he did.

The wolfhound was born in Ustalav, where the people love dogs, even giving them the run of the streets in some towns. In Greengold we couldn't bring him inside a tavern,

and in Absalom we tried four inns before we found one where the hound could sleep at the foot of the boss's bed. When we presented ourselves to the Decemvirate, the boss told me that Arnisant had to appear to be my dog rather than his, lest someone among the Decemvirate consider the count unclean.

They paused at the entrance to take off their shoes. Kazuko's were a pair of wooden clogs that looked uncomfortable, while the men's were thick-soled slippers. I looked to the boss. He removed his fancy buckled shoes. I took off my black leather kickers.

At the scene of the crime, Takeda took one look at the summoning circle and a longer one at me. He didn't like the hint of Hell in my eyes.

He didn't make such a good first impression either. Even from a few feet away, Takeda smelled like a man who hadn't been home for a couple of days. He'd shaved the top of his head and tied his hair back in a sloppy queue. His robe needed mending here and there. The zinnia leaves printed on its fabric had faded. Unlike his men, who wore two swords in their sashes, he had only a single short blade.

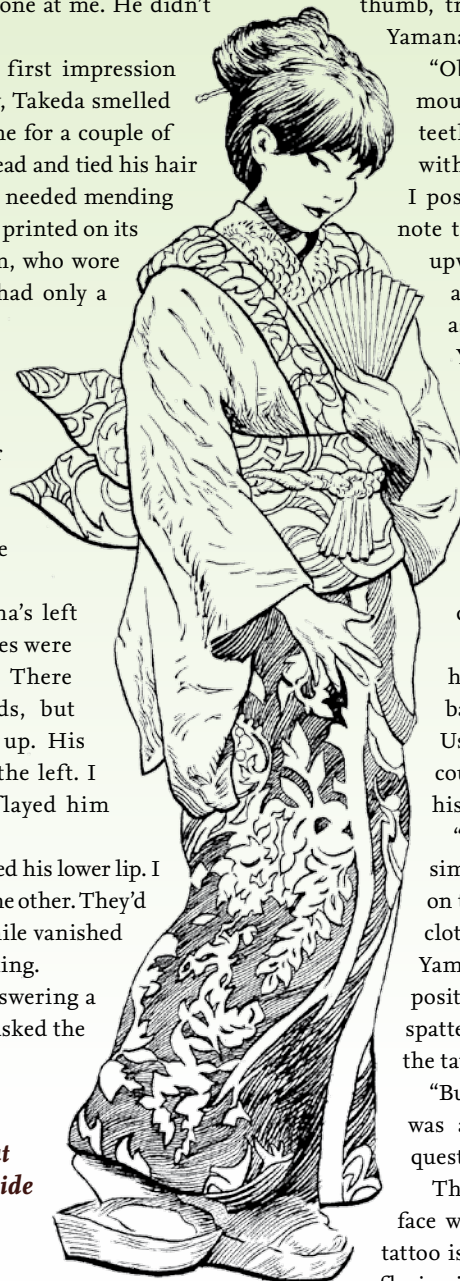
The boss stayed back as Takeda examined the body. Kazuko stood two steps behind the count, meek as a mouse. Despite her timid demeanor, she didn't look away as the constables turned over the body and peeled away the bloody robes.

Someone had skinned Yamana's left arm with a sharp knife. The edges were perfect at shoulder and wrist. There were no other obvious wounds, but Yamana's face was all twisted up. His open eyes peered down and to the left. I got the idea that those who'd flayed him made him watch.

Takeda stepped back and pinched his lower lip. I caught one of his men smiling at the other. They'd seen that reaction before. The smile vanished the moment the man saw me looking.

"Please do me the honor of answering a few questions," said Takeda. He asked the obvious things.

"Kazuko is cute as a bug, but that won't protect her if the killers decide to take out the only witness."



The boss didn't go into detail about our mission in Oda. When he admitted that he had touched Yamana's body, Takeda asked why.

"To ascertain whether his life was beyond saving," said the count. "And to uncover any clues the killers left behind."

"You say 'killers,'" said Takeda. His tone wasn't sly, but I figured it was a trap. The boss didn't step into it.

"There were at least three assailants. No fewer than two to restrain Yamana, and one to flay the tattoo from his arm."

"What makes you think he had a tattoo?"

"Look here." He turned one of his rings around and cupped his palm. He stroked the diamond with his thumb, triggering a bright light. He shone it on Yamana's face.

"Observe the marks on either side of the mouth and these thread fragments in the teeth. They indicate that Yamana was gagged with a red cloth. Finding no such cloth here, I postulate that the killers took it away. Also note this ligature around the throat. It trends upward across the outer jawbone. At this angle, the garrote would not have caused asphyxiation. Thus it is probable that Yamana was not strangled but constrained by someone standing behind him. That person stands five or six inches taller than Yamana, whose height I estimate as five feet five inches."

I watched the faces of the locals while the boss did his thing. Their skepticism gradually relaxed as the boss listed a dozen details they had overlooked.

It had been a long time since I'd heard him go at it with such confidence, but he was back in fighting trim after our expedition in Ustalav. All it took was some distance from court, from his peers—and, most of all, from his wine cellar.

"Here at the wrist you will note a ligature similar to the one around the neck. The bruise on the back of the hand indicates a knot in the cloth. I expect a man, another strong one, held Yamana's arm stretched out from his body—a position consistent with the copious blood spatter on the floor—as a third party cut away the tattoo."

"But how, honorable count, do you know there was a tattoo?" Takeda's polite tone kept the question just short of an accusation.

The boss has a knack for keeping a straight face when he's showing off. "The presence of a tattoo is suggested by the particular course of the flaying implement. See here in the exposed muscles

the deeper incision along the inner arm? It is an irregular but not random path, suggesting that those removing the skin wished to cut around the borders of a pattern, in this case a sinuous line. Perhaps Yamana had a snake or dragon tattooed on his arm."

Takeda rubbed the back of his neck and smiled. "Your observations are most keen, honorable count."

"How many previous victims have you found?"

Takeda blinked.

The count was too polite to explain what I'd already sussed out: the inspector had obviously been without a bath for days, too busy on the case to go home.

"Yamana is the third such victim."

"Since you are the investigating official, may I assume all of the murders have occurred within the eleventh precinct?"

"The second victim was found within the twelfth, but I retain jurisdiction."

"When did they begin?"

"We found the first victim two nights ago, another last night."

"And the others were flayed in areas other than the left arm, yes?"

Takeda smiled his appreciation. Back in Cheliax, the boss had trouble with officials afraid he was out to steal their glory. This guy seemed more concerned about getting the job done. "Right and left legs.

"And the subjects of the missing tattoos?"

"A tengu and a yeti."

"Miss Kazuko, can you tell us what your master had tattooed on his arm?"

I was looking at her when the count asked the question, so I saw her shock at the question. "I was my master's housekeeper only."

"Did he have a wife?"

"My master's wife died seven years ago."

"A concubine?"

"No."

"A body servant?"

She shook her head.

The count returned his attention to the inspector. "Have you compiled a list of the city's tattoo artists?"

Takeda gestured, and one of his men presented a scroll.

"There are more than one hundred such persons in Oda," said Takeda. "With our meager resources already stretched thin, we have only begun to inquire."

"You may find it useful to prioritize the interrogations by neighborhood," said the boss. He scanned the list of names. "If I may be so bold as to offer a suggestion..."

"Please, honorable count, be so bold."

"First question those tattoo artists who work in proximity to the victims. It will be helpful to annotate a map."

Takeda dispatched one of his men to summon a stretcher for Yamana and to return with a map. The other he set to

guarding the gate. When they were gone, he straightened his robes and bowed low toward the count.

"How else would you advise me, honorable Count Jeggare?"

The boss returned the bow, lower than before, but still not as low as Takeda. "Forgive my manner, Inspector Takeda. I mean no disrespect to the efforts you and your men have undertaken. It is all too easy for an armchair investigator like me to dispense opinion after the hard work of dutiful men."

Yamana accepted the compliment with a bow. They did it again. I'd never seen so much bowing before, and I'm from Cheliax.

"You are too kind, honorable count."

They compared bows again, so I sidled over to whisper to Kazuko.

"What's a tengu?"

"A bird spirit," she said. "Half man, half raven. They are thieves and cutthroats."

"Shapeshifters, is it? We've dealt with their kind before."

Kazuko shot me a skeptical look. "You have never been to Minkai, have you?"

I shrugged.

"Tengus do not change shape. They are always half men, like—" She covered her mouth, but I saw the smile.

Go on, I thought. Say, "Half men like you and your boss."

She didn't. The boss and Takeda weren't the only polite ones in the room. I'd heard enough about tengus.

"What's a yeti?"

Half an hour later, more guards arrived to remove Yamada's body. As they departed, I caught the names of the first two men, Shiro and Osamu. They followed Takeda and the boss as they inspected the grounds and house. I followed them, just in case my Hell-touched vision picked up something the boss's elven eyes missed. No chance of that with the moon all fat and bright. In the dark, I'm the one you want searching for that coin you dropped. In the moonlight, the boss is your man.

We left Arnisant to stand sentinel in the yard. If anything bigger than a squirrel put its head over the wall, he'd let us know. I sat in the kitchen with Kazuko as she boiled water for tea. It was ready by the time the other men returned. They accepted the porcelain cups without looking at her.

When it was my turn—last, of course—I nodded over the cup to thank Kazuko. She blushed and looked away. She'd come around.

The boss and Takeda consulted the list of tattoo artists, marking their locations on the map. Comparing them with the sites of the murders, they narrowed the list to nine.

"It is possible that the murdered men went to an artist outside of their district," said Takeda. "That is assuming they

received their tattoos from the same source.” His voice was weary, like he was all too used to running down dead leads.

“Indeed,” said the count. “Yet when time is of the essence, we must explore the probable before the merely possible.”

Takeda nodded agreement. “Here.” He pointed to one of the marks indicating a tattoo shop. “This is the Felicitous Moon. Its owner is known throughout the city for the quality of his work.”

“Is his price high?”

Takeda nodded.

“Yamada was a man of substantial means. What of the other victims?”

“Both were wealthy.”

“And yet there was no evidence of theft at any of the murder scenes?”

Takeda shook his head. “The absence of other robbery convinced me the thieves are after the tattoos alone.”

“The people of Oda are fortunate to have such a man as you investigating this crime.”

Takeda bowed. “If you and your man do not have pressing business elsewhere, perhaps you would be so good as to accompany me to the Felicitous Moon. I would be grateful if you would offer your advice as we proceed with the investigation.”

They weren’t fooling me with this little pantomime, but Takeda’s men looked impressed. They stood a little straighter, proud in the reflected glory of the boss’s compliment. I’d have bet a fat purse that the boss and Takeda arranged this mummery while the guards were busy elsewhere. Or maybe guys like them just knew when to put on the show.

While the boss protested that we would only be in the way—a ruse even Shiro and Osamu saw through—I watched Kazuko. She had become still once she saw that we were about to leave her there alone.

“Want me to walk her home?” I asked the boss. Only then did I realize the problem: I didn’t know the way to this tattoo shop. It would have to be one of Takeda’s men.

He considered the question for a moment before addressing Takeda. “Were there witnesses to the previous murders?”

Takeda pinched his lower lip. “I take your meaning.” He looked at his men, and I could see each of them trying to make himself less conspicuous than his partner. “I need at least one of my men to maintain this site.”

“Please do not trouble yourselves,” said Kazuko.

“No,” said Takeda. “It is best you remain with us until I can assign protectors to watch over you.”

Kazuko accepted his decision by lowering her gaze.

“We shall await you outside the gate,” said the boss.

Beyond Yamada’s garden was a narrow lane bordered on one side by high brick walls, on the other by a row of single-story houses. The moonlight turned the roof tiles blue, but I could barely see past the flared edges. I looked straight up, and Desna smiled on me. There was her Stair

of Stars. My gaze climbed it to Cynosure, the pole star, and I got my bearings.

To the north the alley disappeared into darkness, although I could make out a cat prowling east to west at the end. To the south was a wider street full of narrow townhouses.

“Questions?” asked the boss. He likes to quiz me during a case, to see how well I’m keeping up.

“I’m good,” I said. “You want to know what a yeti is?”

He started to answer before realizing I was having a joke.

“This is not the time for levity,” he said. “Our only contact is dead, and there is no sign of the pearl in his house.”

“The pearl?”

“It is the pleasure of my... superiors,” he nearly choked on the word, “that we recover a rare magical pearl. Or rather, the husk of a pearl that once held a powerful magic, now expended.”

“What for?”

“It was deemed unnecessary to supply us with the details.”

“Huh,” I said. “I guess you pissed off some high mucky-muck in your little club.”

He glowered. “Not the time for levity.”

“Got it.”

“What is your impression of Takeda?”

“I like him. He doesn’t seem too crafty, but he’s smart. He’s tired, but it doesn’t make him irritable. His men look to him.”

The boss nodded. He often already knows my opinion, but he likes to hear it all the same. He grew up in a high tower, me in the gutter. We see things from different angles, and he likes to compare the difference when there is one. He calls it “triangulating.”

“Did you notice his wakizashi?”

The spell that let me understand the local lingo also let me know that word meant the shorter of the two blades the other men wore. “Yeah, he doesn’t have the long one. Maybe he lost it in a bet.”

“No, the katana is not only a weapon but a sign of station. Takeda and his men are samurai, knights.”

“Knights lose at dice.”

“Samurai do not lose their katanas.”

“Maybe he likes fighting close-up.” That’s another difference between the boss and me. He fights at the end of a long blade. I like the personal touch.

“What of the housekeeper?”

“Kazuko? She’s cute as a bug. I think she likes me.”

He sighed. “I mean, what is your impression of her testimony?”

I knew what he meant. “She seems straight enough. Scared, but not so much that I figure she’s putting it on.”

“She left the house to summon the constabulary,” said the boss. “Upon finding her employer dead, she could have removed the pearl to a hiding place.”

THE FLAYED MAN

"In that case, why did she come back?"

He shot me a disappointed look, but I got it. "Sure, sure, to throw us off the scent. But what would a servant girl need with some magic—or formerly magic—pearl? You'd expect her to steal something she could use or fence."

The boss, like his peers, tends to suspect the servants first.

A sound on the nearest roof alerted me to the intruder. The boss heard it too, but before his hand could touch his sword, I whipped him around against the wall, under the sheltering eaves.

That move made me his shield against the second attacker, the one we hadn't heard. Metal struck divots in the bricks to either side of me. Three solid blows hit me in the neck and shoulder. I glimpsed one of them out of the corner of my vision.

It was a throwing star the size of a biscuit.

Arnisant barked to wake the moon.

The boss dipped low and stepped to his right. A rattle scroll in his hand came alive, shooting a beam of white flame under my arm and across the alley. It struck a figure crouching on the opposite wall. The fire lit up his black clothes and washed over his leather mask.

There was something eerie about that mask. Its surface was irregular but all black. I couldn't make out the details.

His target marked, Arnisant leaped at our attacker. The wolfhound was big enough to put his paws on my shoulders and look down at me. His jaws snapped at the man's hands. Startled, the masked man fell back behind the wall, slapping at the flames.

The big knife was in my hand, a pair of throwing knives in the other. I turned my back on the boss and scanned the wall for any other movement. Seeing none, I whirled diagonally away to have a look at the roof. Two more figures knelt there.

One fired a little bow. I swept out my arm to deflect an arrow, but instead a hard lead ball deadened my wrist. I lost the big knife.

The second figure flung more stars. One tugged at my jacket as it passed through the leather.

"Ninja!" yelled Shiro. Through the boss's spell, I understood the word to mean "spy," "assassin," and something more than either of those words. Shiro and Osamu rushed out of Yamada's yard, each drawing his katana. Behind them, Takeda pushed Kazuko behind the shelter of the gate and raised his wakizashi over his head.

His sword drawn and a rattle scroll in his other hand, the boss moved toward me, but I waved him back.

I flicked my knives at the archer. One hit, but I saw the other wink in the moonlight as it flew past. The hit didn't drop the man, but it spoiled his aim. Shiro cursed as another lead shot cracked off the pavement at his feet.

Osamu fumbled with a whistle he wore on a string around his neck, but by the time the shrill note woke the neighborhood, the assassins were gone. We withdrew to Yamada's yard and stood near the gate. Arnisant followed close behind. He coughed up a pair of black-gloved fingers. I kicked them away before he could gobble them up again.

The boss opened my jacket and eased a ragged dart out of my neck. It hurt worse coming out than it had going in. He examined the star and took a whiff of it.

"Not poisoned," he said, sniffing again. "Probably."

"Terrific."

More constables' whistles answered Shiro's call. Judging from the sound, they were close.

I shrugged off my jacket to let the boss remove the other darts without spoiling the leather. Kazuko tore strips off her hem to bandage me.

"You don't have to," I said, but it was too late. And it was a good thing she'd done it, because my bleeding was, as the boss might say, copious.

The count gave me a crystal flask the size of my thumb. It was one of the healing potions he'd had me buy in Absalom.

"You sure?" I knew how much they'd cost.

"Drink it," he said. "And pray we do not need them all before this night is through."

"Takeda clearly has the respect of his men—and for good reason."

