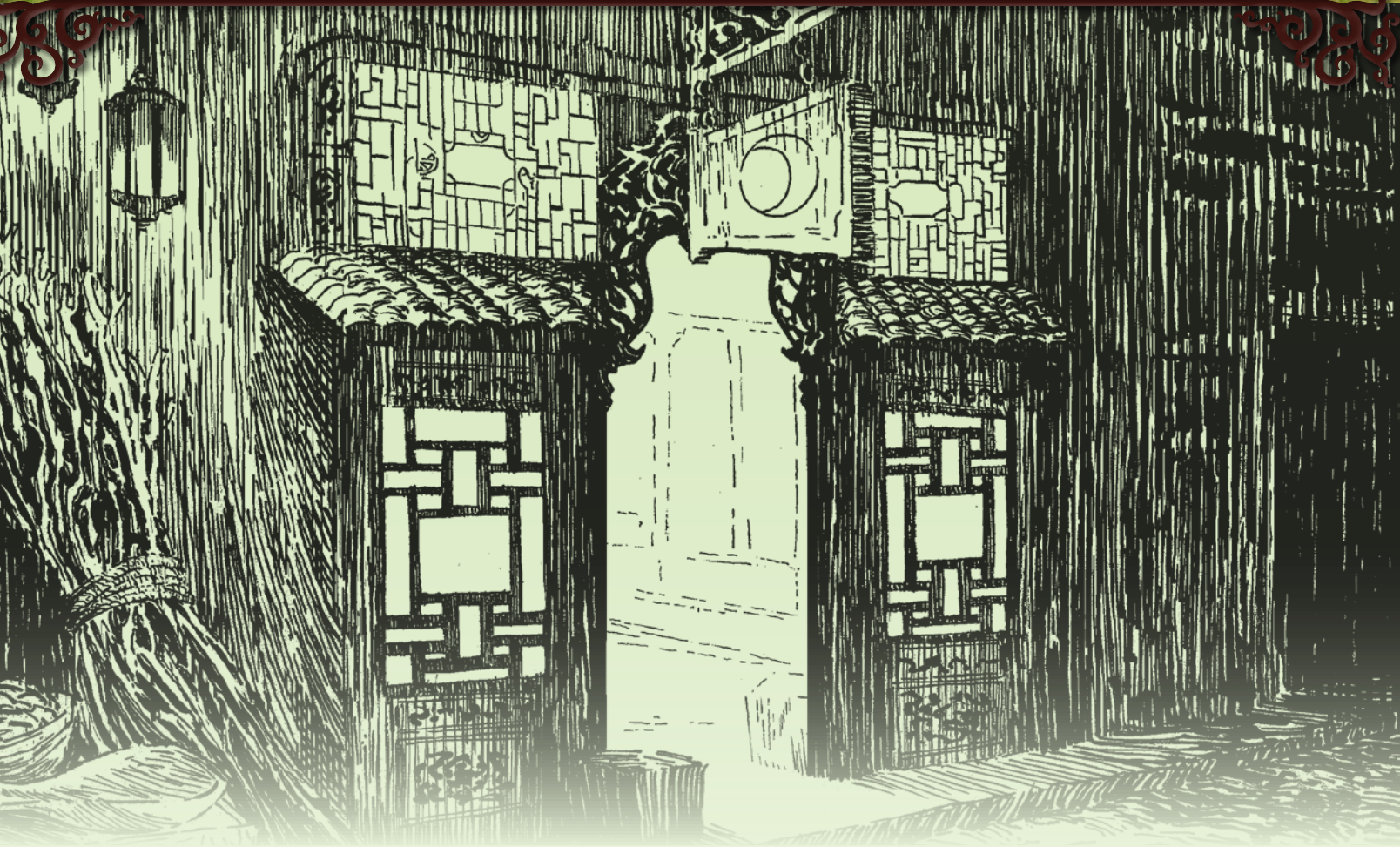


JADE REGENT



THE FELICITOUS MOON

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: HUSKS 2 OF 6

As we left our contact's house, I realized how bad it was that Yamana Hisao was dead. The Pathfinders in Absalom sent us to the Minkai conjurer so he could teleport us back after we'd fetched his magic pearl.

I whispered to the boss, "Who's going to send us back to Absalom?" His lips tightened, but he didn't say anything.

We were screwed.

I rubbed the back of my neck and shoulder where the throwing stars had hit me. The wounds had shrunk to chubby little scars, but I felt the tender bruises underneath. After giving me the healing potion, the boss suggested lighting me up would have had the same effect.

The boss once saved my life by dropping a fireball on me to incinerate a swarm of undead. Not only didn't the

spell kill me, but it healed my broken back. The problem is that enough fire burns away my good looks and cool temper.

All things being equal, I'd rather drink a potion.

We hustled down the hill to the lower districts of Oda. Along every third or fourth street, yellow lamps bobbed ahead of the watchmen's shadows. Cresting the hill, we saw the ocean half a mile away, the water a black mirror to the sky, the stars winking at their reflections. The shore was brighter still, with hundreds of lanterns forming constellations on the land.

"There lies the thirteenth district, the Seahorse." Inspector Takeda paused to gesture at the bright area. A strip of land curled out into the ocean, fading into a coiling sandbar exposed by the retreating tide. Black

piers jutting from the beach, where hundreds of fishing boats lay on the sand.

"Where is the tattoo shop?" asked the boss.

Takeda indicated a spot halfway along the slope between us and the Seahorse. He set a brisk pace. The boss, Arnisant, and I had no trouble matching his speed, but I worried about Kazuko. The housekeeper's wooden clogs sounded like a drum roll on the pavestones. She managed to stay exactly eight steps behind the inspector. She'd hitched up her robes, revealing a couple of inches of skin above those cute little toe-socks. She saw me looking, and I threw her the little smile. She returned her gaze to the street.

Takeda's men Shiro and Osamu watched our backs in case the ninja came back for another go. They'd acted spooked ever since the attack. Despite their identical clothes and haircuts, the constables didn't look much alike. Osamu was ten years older, with a scar on his lip over a missing tooth. The way they held their swords steady as they jogged reminded me of what the boss had said about Takeda's missing katana. If it was such an important symbol of his samurai status, I had to agree that it was weird he didn't have one.

Since Takeda's boys had our backs, I kept an eye on the rooftops. The only prowlers I spied were a couple of cats. A mangy orange tom hissed at Arnisant. The wolfhound ignored the challenge, so I hissed back for him. The cat yowled at the sight of my teeth.

Most of the single-story houses were wood with paper windows, but every third building had a stone wall between it and its neighbor. I didn't need the boss to explain why. Back in Egorian, letting your house burn down earns you a beggaring fine. The penalty grows worse with every neighboring home destroyed. After three or four, you end up on the tines.

Takeda rounded a corner and slowed. The row houses gave way to shops. The boss's spell let me speak and understand the local lingo, but I couldn't read the signs. Even so, I knew our destination as soon as I saw the crescent moon sign tattooed with the images of a fancy dragon and unicorn. The Felicitous Moon.

Takeda banged on the door, calling up to the second-floor balcony. "Wake up! Wake up! By the authority of Lord Koga, I command you to open the door."

He kept up the racket, but no one called down. I didn't see any lights on the other side of the closed windows.

Takeda pulled the latch, but the door was locked tight. He glanced at Osamu, who bowed and ran around to the back. Takeda banged on the door and repeated his commands. From the other side of the row houses, Osamu called out, "Locked!"

Takeda frowned. "Perhaps Ichisada spends the night elsewhere. We shall move on to the next tattoo shop and return here tomorrow."

The boss raised his head and inhaled through his nose. He moved closer to the door and sniffed again. Half-elves are known for sharp hearing, but the boss's nose is at least as keen as his ears. I couldn't smell anything but the faint odors of charcoal and roast pork. Arnisant's stomach rumbled. Ropes of saliva dribbled from his jaws. The drooling was the wolfhound's one really unattractive trait.

"Inspector," said the boss. "I suspect we shall find Ichisada inside, yet unable to answer his door."

Takeda turned to Shiro. "Fetch a locksmith."

"There is no need for such a delay," said the boss. He gestured to me. "With your permission..."

Takeda hesitated a moment before nodding. I slipped a feeler and the snake rake from my sleeve. Tipping a wink to Kazuko, who stood behind Takeda, all cute and demure, I knelt before the door.

"Radovan once worked as a locksmith," the boss said.

It wasn't exactly a lie. Anyway, Takeda didn't complain.

The boss twisted his ring to produce a bright light in the cup of his hand. He held it over the lock to give me a better view. I didn't need it to pick the lock, but it never hurts. I can't see colors in the dark, and it's good to be able to spot the indigo stain of black lotus extract or the sheen of sassone leaf residue.

The keyhole didn't look much different from those back home. There was no cover, and the cylinder was nice and roomy. I ran the feeler inside and counted four pins. The shear line was too ragged to rake open, but it wouldn't take long to crack the hard way. I lay down the tools, slipped a half-diamond pick and torsion wrench from my boot.

As I trapped the first pin, I felt a little more spring than I expected. A funny feeling tickled in my gut.

"Step back a bit, will you, boss?"

He moved away, still holding up his palm to light the door.

The trap slit was in the first place I looked, half an inch from the surface in the doorframe to my right. I looked up, left, and back down, checking for others. The boss realized what I was doing and followed my gaze with his light. We did it again to be sure. Then he held the light to the side, illuminating the slit. Inside I saw the razor edge of a spring-bound blade. Sure enough, it glistened with a ruddy paste. I didn't recognize the stuff. The hairs on the back of my neck rose.

"Give me the small and medium hooks," I said, still holding the first pin half-triggered. "Upper left sleeve, inside."

The boss had to search for a second, since it was a new jacket, but he got the picks without jostling me. He popped them in my mouth like a pair of slim cigars. Careful, I

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“So this is what was worth torturing a man to death for.”

offered him the torsion wrench and half-diamond. He held them steady, and I let go.

“What is it?” Osamu panted after his sprint back from the rear. Shiro shushed him.

I ignored the junior constables and turned my attention to the trap. I probed with the hooks until I found a couple of narrow wedge points. I wiggled the hooks until they were nice and tight before taking the lock picks back from the boss.

The rest was easy, except for the tense second when I triggered the lock. The door swung open an inch, and the hooks trembled as they held the blade trap in place. Behind me, Shiro and Osamu sighed in relief.

Takeda stepped forward to push open the door, but the boss stopped him. “A moment more, Inspector. To be safe.”

What he meant was I should go first. After all, I’m the bodyguard.

I checked the door for tripwires or any other surprises. Finding none, I pushed it open and peered around.

Inside was a tiny lobby. Dozens of scrolls hung on the walls, each depicting a tattoo design: demons, courtesans, soldiers, swords, tigers, snakes, sharks, octopuses, falcons, ogres, phoenixes, unicorns, dragons—lots of dragons. Thick straw mats covered the floor. To one side lay a

clutter of empty cabinet drawers. Torn books, scrolls, and single pages formed a mound on top of them.

I crept over and pushed aside a curtain to see into the next room. It took me a few seconds to speak after seeing the source of the odor we’d detected. It wasn’t pork.

“I think this is our guy.”

I stepped inside, making room for the others to follow. Takeda was first. He blanched at the sight of the naked body suspended by chains at eye level. Steel hooks pierced its flesh at the ankles, thighs, wrists, and arms, as well as four points on the back. It hung facedown, its head bowed over a brazier.

Whoever it was that tortured him left a couple of cooking skewers in his body. Half his flesh had been peeled away. What remained was a horror of black and red burns.

I knew at once the poor bastard had been a long time dying.

The boss plucked a scented handkerchief from his sleeve and put it to his nose. Beside him, Arnisant snuffled at a dark stain on the floor.

Shiro gagged. Osamu caught Kazuko by the shoulders and turned her back toward the other room before she got a good look.

“We are too late!” blurted Shiro. “It is just like the murder of Yamana.”

“No,” said the boss. “This crime is entirely different.”

Shiro jutted his jaw in a way that said he wanted an explanation. He had to wait while the boss continued his examination.

No one had stolen this guy’s skin. The pieces they cut from him lay cracked and curled in the ashes beneath his charred face. I put a finger on the brazier. It was cool. From that and the decay of the body, I reckoned he’d been dead a couple or three days.

While the boss inspected the corpse, I followed Arnisant around the room. More tattoo patterns decorated the walls. Someone had pushed a padded table against the wall to make room for the torture. Three more cabinets stood with their empty mouths gaping, drawers pulled out and smashed. Broken jars littered the floor in pools of green, purple, and yellow dye.

Arnisant nosed a bit of Ichisada’s skin that had escaped the brazier. I snatched it away. First the fingers, now this. The last thing I wanted was the hundred-and-sixty-pound wolfhound getting a taste for human.

The scrap of flesh was round as a coin, about two inches wide with a zinnia tattoo. Once I had the nasty

little morsel in hand, I didn't know what to do with it. I didn't want it in my pocket, and Arnisant was taller than the table, so it was no use putting it there. I laid it on Ichisada's shoulder, tattoo-side up.

The scrap caught the boss's attention. He peered at it a few seconds before continuing his circuit of the room.

Takeda sent his men through the rest of the house, cautioning them not to disturb any evidence. The inspector stayed behind, watching the boss.

Since Arnisant was nearby and the boss knew how to use a sword as well as his scrolls, I saw no harm in leaving him with Takeda. I followed Osamu and Shiro. When they paused to light a lamp in the kitchen, which was missing its cooking brazier, I went upstairs to check the dark rooms before they made a mess of them.

Someone had tossed the upper floor rooms just like those below. Except for a litter of art books in one room, I didn't find much. The killers had ripped open a quilted mattress but rolled it out of the way to pry up the floorboards. Beneath them was a little cache, probably for a lockbox they'd stolen. They'd dumped out potted plants and cut apart a few paper lantern covers.

I found closed latches on all the windows. By the time I got back to the balcony doors, Shiro had arrived with a lantern.

I waved him over to the door. He held up the light, and I saw a slender black thread on the latch. Only a quarter inch or so hung from the loop around the brass hook. It obviously wasn't a trap, so I eased open the doors. I spotted a couple of fresh vertical scrapes where the doors met and knew this was where the killers came in and went out. They'd slipped the latch with a blade to get in. They pulled it back in place with a thread to shut it on the way out.

On the balcony we found a few more overturned plants and a small round mat. In the light of Shiro's lantern, I spied a few partial footprints in the spilled potting soil. The shape suggested the intruders wore soft boots or slippers.

Shiro groaned. "Kappas."

"What?" The boss's spell didn't unfold that word for me, unless it meant some kind of weird turtle.

"The Kappas are criminals, a gang. They are rumored to have ninja among their members."

"Come on." I led the way back downstairs.

Osamu was back, but in his absence Kazuko had crept into the room to resume her post behind Takeda. It occurred to me that she followed him the way Arnisant heeled to the boss. I didn't like it. We might be servants, but we're not dogs.

Kazuko peered around Takeda's shoulder at the hanging body. Her eyes were a little wide, but her expression was more curious than frightened.

I liked her a little more for that. The kid had moxie.

The boss plucked a scroll from his belt of little holsters. I'd been meaning to suggest he conceal the things, but he liked showing off. Some guys in my old line of work do the same thing with knives and throwing blades. I think it's a bad idea to advertise where you keep your kit.

"Now," said the boss, "The late Ichisada Jiru will tell us why he died."

Osamu gasped, but he stopped his hand before it touched his katana. That was a good thing for him. I had the big knife in hand and was ready to do more than flash it if he got frisky.

Takeda tried to act cool, but he couldn't keep the disgust off his face. "Count Jeggare, do you mean to employ necromancy?"

"Certainly not." The boss stiffened, offended at the suggestion.

"Even so, I must tell you I am not authorized to pay for magical assistance. Our precinct's annual accounting—"

"I am neither a necromancer nor a hedge wizard seeking to conjure coins from your purse," the boss snapped. It was his turn to catch himself. He changed his tone. "Honored Inspector, I would consider it a privilege to assist your investigation with any means at my disposal. I assure you I practice no unwholesome magics, and there will be no charge."

Takeda looked relieved. He bowed, the boss bowed, Takeda bowed again, and the boss had enough.

Before triggering the raffle scroll, the boss pointed at the ceiling. I didn't see what he meant until he twisted his light ring and shone it on a space above the table. Years of smoke had stained most of the plaster brown, but a sharp rectangular area remained white.

"They took something off the ceiling," I said.

"I think not. There are no signs of removed fixtures, nor any indication of a broken adhesive. Yet the plaster in the borders of that rectangle appears exceptionally smooth compared to the surface around it."

Shiro and Osamu exchanged blank looks, but I could tell by his expression that Takeda followed what the boss was suggesting.

The boss ran his thumb over the edge of the raffle scroll, releasing its magic. He held up a hand, looking through the V of his thumb and the rest of his hand. "As I suspected, an illusion conceals a box secured to the ceiling. There we will find what the intruders sought."

I hopped onto the table and reached for the blank spot. Eight inches below the ceiling, my hands touched an unseen surface. I felt around, tracing the borders of the wooden box until I found an open face. Inside, my fingers touched several slender books. They became visible as I pulled them from the magic box. I climbed down and put the books on the table for everyone to see.

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Takeda kept looking back up at the ceiling. “I don’t understand. Why do we not see smoke stains on the surface of the invisible compartment?”

“A most astute question,” said the boss. “As particles of smoke and grime settle upon the enchanted object, they become part of the body originally rendered invisible. The effects of the spell immediately apply also to the blemishing material. This very issue has long been a source of debate between the instructors of the Acadamae in Korvosa and the docents of the Arcanamirium in Absalom. If you wish to study the matter further, you might be interested in a treatise I obtained during a diplomatic mission to Qadira some forty years—”

That was all I could stand before letting my attention wander to the books. Magic doesn’t make sense like botany or engineering or any of the boss’s hundred other hobbies. That’s why it’s called magic.

Kazuko moved beside me. I tipped her a wink to let her know she wasn’t the only one bored by the lecture. She rewarded me with a brief smile before looking down. Takeda’s politeness trapped him into listening to the boss, but it was his own fault for asking a question. While he suffered the penalty, I flipped through the hidden books.

One was some kind of ledger. I couldn’t read a word of it without a different kind of translation spell from the boss, so I set it aside. The next one was not a ledger but a single page bound in pasteboard and tied shut with ribbons. At first it looked like a letter, but with two signatures at the bottom, I figured it for a contract. The boss was going to love that one.

The third book was more fun. Inside were more tattoo references, each one covering both pages. Even allowing for the difference in style between the Varisian tattoos I’d seen and the pictures on Ichisada’s walls, I could tell a master artist had created these. They were full of detail, and every stroke was beautiful by itself. The weird thing was that all of the ink was faded, as if the pages had been left open to the sun a long time. There weren’t many pages in the book. I flipped through them all to see a phoenix, a dragon, a tengu, an octopus with razor claws, a furry ogre, and a goblin with a turtle shell on its back and a bowl-shaped dent on top of its skull.

I pointed at the latter two. I recognized one from Kazuko’s earlier description. After my chat with Shiro, I had a good guess about the other. “I know that’s a yeti. What’s this, a kappa?”

Kazuko nodded. She frowned down at the writing beside the drawings. Even without understanding them, I got the impression they were instructions of some sort. Maybe something about which lines to draw first and things like that. For all I knew, it might as well have been magic.

That was a thought.

“Say, boss,” I said. “Take a look at this.”

He hates being interrupted mid-lecture, but his irritation vanished when he saw the pages. The first book’s pages had barely stopped fluttering when he picked up the third and ran his finger down each page. The others had to be thinking that he was just feeling the paper, but I knew he’d copied every word and image into the giant book he keeps in his brain.

Everyone else stared while he stood ruminating for a minute. I used the break to count the freckles on Kazuko’s neck. Her pale skin was another kind of illusion, a thin layer of white powder that began to melt during our rush from Yamana’s house. A few faint blemishes had emerged from the fading cover. Seeing her imperfections didn’t make her any less pretty. It made her more real.

“This was the first killing,” said the boss. “The assailants entered through the upstairs balcony—” he paused to see me nod “—between three and four days ago.” The room got quieter as the Minkai held their breath, waiting for him to spill. The boss loves this part. When I’ve figured out a few clues on my own, I kind of love it, too.

“This is the key document.” He held up the contract from the invisible box. “It is an agreement between Ichisada and someone known as the Master Kappa. The former pledges to safeguard six magical tattoos until such time as the latter designates a recipient for them. In exchange, Ichisada enjoys a lifetime exemption from the protection money owed to this Master Kappa.”

“This district does not fall within the Kappas’ territory,” said Takeda.

“Are the gangs at war?”

“No,” said Takeda, pinching his lower lip. “But there have been troubling reports. Members of the Red Knives and Snake Skin gangs have been killed over trifling disputes.”

“Were they important figures? Lieutenants, perhaps?”

“Yes.”

“The intruders came for this book of magical tattoos. Ichisada would not surrender it. Even if he had, the result would have been the same.” He opened the book to the faded images. “Note that the enchantment has been expended. Ichisada had already applied the tattoos, probably to six different subjects. If the torture initially began to extract information, it must have been to gain the identities of those on whom he had applied the tattoos.”

“What do you mean, if it ‘initially began to extract information?’” Takeda’s stoic expression was beginning to crumble.

The boss lifted Ichisada’s head and opened its slack jaw. Inside, the tattoo artist’s tongue was a burned stub.

I winced at the sight, thinking of someone else crippled in that manner. Someone I cared about much more than Ichisada.

"It is impossible to prove by visual examination alone, but it appears that Ichisada was silenced early in the..." He sought the right word and came up with "ordeal."

"Such cruelty," breathed Takeda. Beside him, the faces of Shiro and Osamu froze in grim expressions. Maybe they harbored anger. More likely they covered fear of what the criminals might do to them if they were captured.

"Why would Ichisada cross the Kappas?" asked Shiro.

"Someone offered him money for the tattoos?" suggested Osamu.

"Perhaps," said the boss. "Yet the ledger indicates Ichisada had no shortage of wealthy clients. If he crossed a dangerous gang for money, it seems likely that he would have fled the city rather than suffer their revenge."

"You are right." Takeda glanced at the scrap of flesh I'd left on the corpse. That's when I realized the zinnia tattoo cut from Ichisada looked almost identical to the zinnia designs on Takeda's robe. "I believe Ichisada knew he would suffer but accepted the consequences. He defied Master Kappa because he knew the man was evil."

Kazuko gazed at Takeda with a look of wonder or disbelief. He spoke with such intense sincerity that I couldn't believe him, either.

"To whom did Ichisada give these magical tattoos?"

"Unfortunately, the ledger includes no mention of these tattoos," said the boss. He waited while Shiro and Osamu slumped in disappointment before making his reveal. "However, the last page of the book shows unusual wear. Furthermore, it smells faintly of lemon juice, a crude but popular medium for creating hidden writing. Let us uncover its secret."

Activating his light ring again, he held the glowing crystal behind the final page and turned the book for Takeda to see. There in translucent characters were six lines of characters.

Takeda's finger moved to indicate two of the names. "These are the first two victims."

"Who are the others?" asked the boss.

"This one we call Square-Head. He is one of the Snake Skin gang. And this one is a moneylender."

Kazuko craned her neck to look at the list. Takeda took the book from the boss and

snapped it shut, but she'd already seen something. Her hand flew to her mouth, too late to stop her exclaiming, "Matano Hideo!"

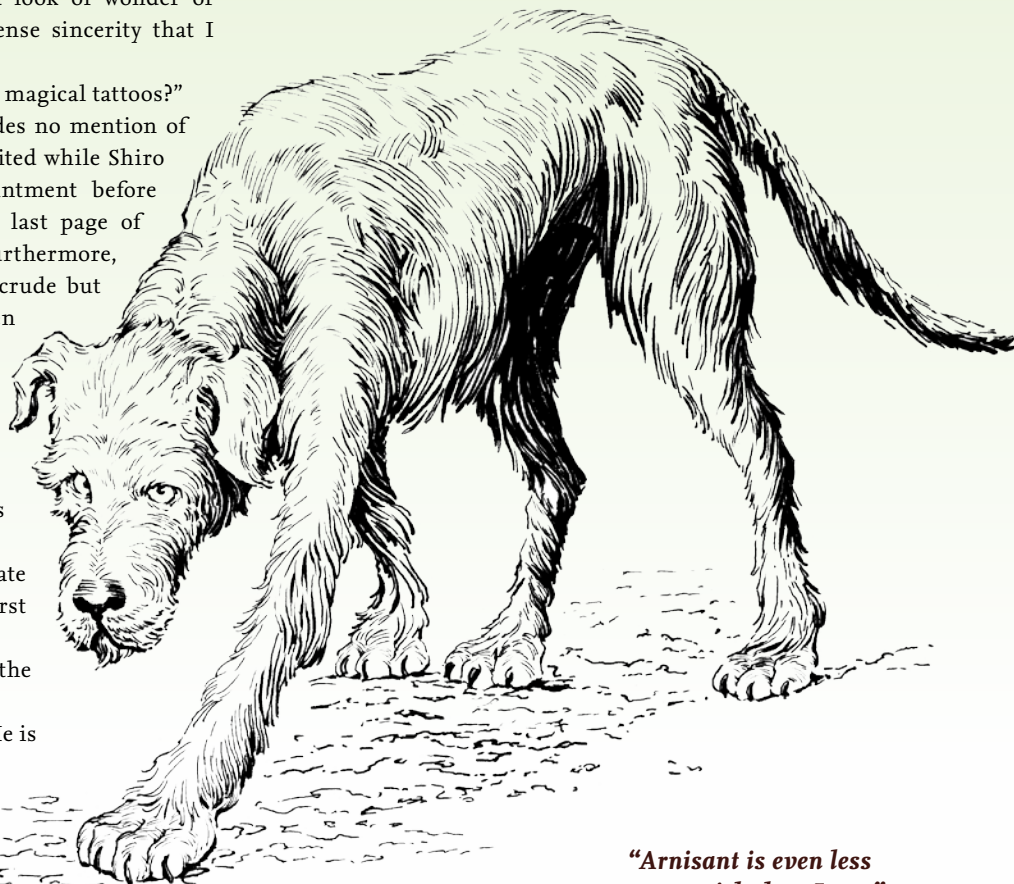
"The famous actor?" said Shiro. "How could a housemaid know a man like him?"

An indignant glare escaped Kazuko's eyes before she lowered her gaze. As her cheeks reddened, I wanted to slap Shiro upside his head. I didn't give a damn if he was a samurai or the king of Minkai. There was no reason to talk to her that way just because she was a servant.

"My neighbor is his housekeeper," she said, her voice still shrill as she wrestled down her anger. "His home is near the Flower and Willow Court."

"We must go there at once," said Takeda. "The death of such a celebrated personage would be an even greater catastrophe than we have already suffered."

"Of course," said the boss. I knew he'd agree. Nobles always stick together. I looked to Arnisant for some commiseration, but the big wolfhound sat beside the boss, pretending not to look at the meat hanging from the ceiling. He could have been a statue except for the streams of drool leaking out of his jowls.



"Arnisant is even less squeamish than I am."