

# JADE REGENT



## FLOWER AND WILLOW PAVILION

### PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: HUSKS 3 OF 6

It's a whorehouse."

Kazuko coughed and retreated behind Inspector Second-Class Takeda. The samurai kept a straight face, but his men flushed. I tried to decide whether they were amused, angry, or ashamed. It's harder for me to read Minkai faces. Their eyes look so different, and they hardly ever look you in the face.

"What?" I said. Maybe the spell on my tongue didn't translate everything right. "Brothel? Bordello? Cathouse? Help me out here, boss. What do they call it in Taldor? A seraglio?"

The count shot me the shut-up look. I shut up.

Could be I was wrong about this Flower and Willow Pavilion, but I didn't think so. We had a first glimpse of the place as we descended the hill from Matano Hideo's house. The actor wasn't home, and his servants didn't expect him until morning. After some indirect questions, Takeda dismissed the servants and told us we would look for Matano at this Flower and Willow Pavilion.

At first glance, the place looked like a temple. Inside the inner courtyard stood six or eight willow trees, their tresses green while all the other trees we'd seen in the city of Oda remained winter bare. I decided some wizard had enchanted the trees, but then I thought of the plant



nurseries on the roof of Greensteeples. The boss had fooled plants into thinking it was summer all year even before he got his magic back. Maybe the gardeners here knew the same tricks.

The buildings formed two single-story squares with another narrow garden between the inner and outer halls. Leafless trees lined the avenue between them, but they looked like nothing I'd seen in Cheliox or Ustalav, or the handful of other countries I'd visited with the count.

Surrounding the outer halls was another garden, this one full of more bare-branched trees and ponds glimmering in the moonlight. Here and there lay patches of raked pebbles. Stupid as that sounds, they were kind of—I don't know. Soothing? Maybe the moonlight was screwing with me, but I liked the pattern the shadows made. It made me think of something I couldn't name, but a thing I wanted all the same. Somehow I knew I'd never get it.

I shook my head. If I didn't watch out, I'd get some philosophy on me. Or worse, some poetry.

A high stone wall surrounded the whole place, two sides facing streets of windowless buildings, the other two against narrow alleys across from the walled backs of row houses. The walls were made for privacy, not security. I could have slipped over the tops with one good jump and pull, but I wouldn't have to. Gates lined every side, each one with a big lock that I could have picked with my little finger. I'd seen something like this before. The brothel's customers bought a key from the owner of the house, the better to slip out from any side. Keep the wife's servants guessing which side to spy on, get home and say you lost track of time talking with an old friend you met on the way home.

If the boss had quizzed me on why I figured the place for a whorehouse—pleasure palace, lord's club, whatever—I had plenty more evidence. A line of one-man carriages drawn by lackeys stood a block away, just close enough to see someone waving from the front gate. Steam rose from a nearby building, and I smelled lye. Someone was working all night to wash the sheets and pillows. If the Pavilion was really a temple, it was dedicated to Calistria, goddess of that little pool of sweat that forms in the hollow of a woman's back.

So really I didn't care if the Minkai were squeamish about it. I know whorehouses, and this was definitely one.

At what I figured for the front entrance, a pair of gate columns supported sculptures of some kind of orchid in a pale green stone. Magical light emanated from deep inside them, revealing flaws of red and black. One look at the fancy lanterns made the boss crane his neck the way he does when he sees something new.

"Those are the most flawless jades I have ever seen," he said. The way his tone changed, I knew he started out

talking to himself but then directed the comment to Takeda so as not to seem peculiar.

Takeda nodded but didn't speak. Again, his men looked embarrassed or something. Maybe they were forbidden to visit brothels while on duty. I never knew that to stop a city guard in Egorian, but these samurai guys seemed wound up tighter than Hellknights. I was starting to think I wasn't going to like them too much.

The gate was open. The only guard was a woman who bowed at our approach, once for each of us. She was no beauty, and she was older than me. Even so, she was wrapped up tight in a silk gown whose fabric looked rich enough for a Chelish lady. It even had a neat little bundle tied with a bow in the small of her back, giving her silhouette a nice bump, the kind I'd like to pat as I went past. I figured her for a reserve, making herself useful the best she could until a busy day.

She faltered twice while greeting us. Once when she recognized Takeda, and once when she got a good look at me. I'm real pretty, but you don't have to be from Cheliox to see I got a little Hell in me. I tipped her a wink, but she was already looking at the ground. Polite maybe, or scared. I like to think my raw masculine charm turned her head.

As Arnisant padded in behind me, the greeter put her fingers to her lips to stop a shriek. Her eyes widened, and I gave her the little smile. "It's all right, sweetheart. Arni won't eat you unless I say so."

I didn't figure she could get any whiter with all that powder on, but she proved me wrong. Takeda turned to the boss and bowed.

"The presence of an animal here is unseemly. Perhaps you could—?"

"Of course," said the boss. He gave Arnisant the hand sign to stay. The Ustalavic wolfhound obeyed.

I let the others go through before fishing out a sausage I'd pocketed in Absalom. Ribbons of saliva poured from Arnisant's jaws as I broke the meat in two.

I tossed him half and watched it disappear. The boss ain't the only wizard in the company. "Be a good boy, Arni, and I'll give you the rest when we're done."

Arnisant turned around, keeping his butt planted on the ground as he turned sentinel toward the line of carriage pullers.

The word "rickshaw" came to mind, and I knew it was the spell working its whammy. I was still getting used to the boss casting spells on me, but so far I liked this one. It was a little confusing sometimes, but it beat spending weeks picking up enough words to negotiate more than finding a latrine.

Inside the outer building, an embassy of four women bowed low toward us. They kept their heads down as we walked along a lane lined with bare trees and empty

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flowerbeds. The earth was dark and moist, but I hadn't seen any snow since we'd arrived. I wondered how far north Minkai lay on the map. I didn't think it would be as southerly as Absalom, where we'd been before the Pathfinder conjuror teleported us across the world. The night air was cool, but it felt more like spring than late winter.

Like the greeter at the gate, the women were gift-wrapped in silk. They wore no jewelry except for the combs and pins that shaped their glossy black hair into shovel blades or knots that would have driven a sailor mad to untie them.

As we drew near, the women raised their heads. Three were young and lovely, with red porcelain smiles. The fourth was older. One look at us, and her perfect smile shattered.

She seemed maybe fifty years old, maybe sixty, depending on how thick she'd laid on the paint. She'd exaggerated a mole on her powder-white cheek with a spot of kohl. She'd also blacked out her teeth, giving her the look of someone who'd been punched in the mouth too often. It exaggerated her grimace and made her look like a banshee about to shrivel us with her wail.

"You!" She sneered at Takeda.

The inspector bowed his head. I'd known the guy for less than two hours, and I didn't know much about Minkai customs. Still, I got the impression he was chagrined, not just being polite. Beside him, Osamu tensed, and Shiro's knuckles whitened as he gripped the scabbard of his katana.

"Official business!" Osamu barked. "Show respect."

Takeda raised his head and looked at his underling. I tried to read his face, but the spell didn't help me understand the emotions there before they settled. I looked to the boss and saw that he too was observing Takeda, even as he pretended to admire the girls behind the angry woman.

"The Flower and Willow Pavilion is the most respected geisha house in all of Oda. Who would send a disgraced petty samurai to disturb our customers?"

Osamu seethed, but Shiro touched his arm before he could speak again. I frowned over the word "geisha," which the spell told me meant something like "courtesan," but not exactly the same. The not-a-whorehouse business was getting confusing. Now even the boss's spell was contradicting what I'd seen with my own eyes.

"Madam Chiyoko, I regret the need to visit at such a busy hour. Urgent duty requires us to speak with Matano Hideo immediately." Takeda's voice was soft, as if he meant to tiptoe past a sleeping tiger.

"Madam," I thought. Unless the spell was getting it wrong, that's what you call the boss of a whorehouse. Either I was the only one who didn't know what was going on here, or else I was the only one who did.

Chiyoko narrowed her eyes as she considered Takeda's words. Instead of answering, she looked over the rest of us. I practiced reading her Minkai face as she considered each of us in turn. She showed obvious contempt and a little fear as her eyes slid past Osamu and Shiro. Whatever her beef, I figured it was with their boss, not the constables.

At the sight of the count, Chiyoko appeared surprised and curious. As she appraised his expensive Chelish clothes, I saw a glitter of greed in her dark eyes. That was something I could read on any face. She was figuring out whether he was a good customer.



*"Beauty is relative, but Chiyoko's teeth-staining doesn't do her any favors."*



Her expression wavered when she turned to me. The black leathers I'd bought in Caliphaz were a poor substitute for the red Chelish jacket I'd lost, but they made me look plenty tough. People got out of my way on the streets of Absalom, merchants and guards alike. Chiyoko sniffed and spared less than a second's glance on Kazuko before returning her gaze to Takeda.

"The honorable Matano is not here. You must leave now and take these servants with you."

Osamu bristled, and I understood that Chiyoko was disrespecting everyone except maybe the count. Takeda showed the boss an apologetic smile. The boss nodded back, and some private message passed between them.

I hated that. After working for Count Jeggare for years, I could read the narrowing of one eye or the twitch of his thumb when he wanted to tell me something without anyone else catching on. Some of it was Pathfinder sign code that he'd taught me, but the rest was our private language. Whatever message the count sent to Takeda, it wasn't meant for me. They were communicating noble to noble. Despite a technicality I had to keep secret, that left me out of their fancy club.

Takeda bowed from the neck and said, "Allow me to present the most honorable Count Varian Jeggare of Cheliaz, a powerful empire in distant Avistan."

The boss did one of his courtly bows, with extra flourishes to show off his jeweled rings. It was then that I caught on to what he and Takeda were up to. I felt stupid for not realizing it before. It was a good play.

And it worked. Chiyoko smiled at the count, showing off those ghastly black teeth. He didn't even flinch.

"Long have I wished to observe the chanoyu performed by a true geisha of Oda," said the boss.

Through the spell I understood he was talking about some sort of tea service. Running around Oda was thirsty work. I said, "A hot cup sounds good."

Takeda and the boss turned at the same time. Their expressions told me I wasn't invited to their tea party.

"On the other hand, maybe I'll stretch my legs." I saw by the way the boss touched the tip of his third finger to the base of his thumb that I'd guessed right. He wanted me to have a look around, and not just in the garden.

"Remain here," Takeda told his men. He and the boss followed Chiyoko and one of her girls into the outer halls. The other young women remained with Osamu and Shiro, flirting with them as the samurai scowled and blushed by turns. I left them to it.

Away from the entrance path, shadows provided plenty of cover between the building and the outer gate. I strolled toward the outer halls for a closer look. I'd gotten out of sight of the samurai before I realized Kazuko was following me.

"Desna weeps! Don't creep up on me like that, kid."

"I am not a child."

Her defiant tone threw me for a second, but I liked it. She'd never talk to Takeda or the boss that way, just me. I liked that, too. "Sorry, Kazuko."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm just having a look around while the fancy people sip their tea and hold up their pinkies." She blinked at my joke. Even through spells, some things don't translate. "What're you doing standing on my shadow?"

"You must not offend the geisha."

She was trying to keep me out of trouble. "You should be with the constables. You're only tagging along so they can keep you safe until we find the guys who killed your boss."

"I do not feel safe with them."

The little smile snuck out before I could stop it. I caught her meaning: she felt safer with me than with the samurai. "I won't let anything happen to you."

She looked a little reassured. I stepped closer, but she retreated. All right, I thought. I've got patience to spare. She's going to come around.

I went to one of the side doors. The keyhole was as big as the ones we'd seen on the wall. I scanned the edges of the doorframe. Nothing looked fishy, so I raked open the lock. It popped on the first tug.

"You are a burglar!" whispered Kazuko. Her shocked tone contained a hint of admiration.

"Nah," I said. "Not really. Not anymore, anyway."

"Your master knows this?"

"Listen, he's not my master. Got it?"

"He behaves like your master. But you do not behave like a servant."

"That's because I'm not a servant." I'd never liked that word. It wasn't much of an improvement over "slave." "I'm what you might call a freelancer."

"So you would work for others?"

"Well, no. The count has what you call an exclusive with me." I didn't like having to explain our arrangement. "Quiet, you. I'm concentrating."

From within the building I heard the sound of a stringed instrument and a woman's queer song. She wasn't out of tune, exactly. It was as if she were getting them all a little wrong on purpose. Or maybe not wrong, exactly. It was still pretty.

I eased open the door. Inside was a short passage leading to a hall running down the center of the outer building. When I stepped inside, Kazuko whispered, "Your shoes!"

"What?"

She demonstrated by removing her wooden clogs as she entered, stepping onto the woven mat in her stocking feet. The Minkai sure are fussy about footprints. Anyway, taking off my boots would make me quieter, so I did the same. I gave her a look that asked, "Satisfied?" She nodded that she was, barely.

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Along the main hall stood sliding paper doors through which I saw the silhouettes of men and women sitting on the floor. Through one I saw a woman filling a tiny cup from a flask each time the man beside her drank. From another I saw the singing woman with the shape of a kind of lute on her lap. Her audience was three men who leaned toward her over their little table.

The paper doors weren't locked, but someone had laid a red silk cord over the knobs. It was no impediment hanging loose like that, but you couldn't miss seeing it there. I took that as a Do Not Disturb notice. It reminded me of the hat we'd hang on the doorknob back in my Goatherds days, when four of us shared a flat and somebody had a woman inside.

"Do you see?" whispered Kazuko. "Geisha are not prostitutes. They are performers, highly trained and much admired for their skills in music, poetry, and courtly behavior."

"All right, I got it. You're right and I'm wrong."

She said nothing, so I looked back at her. She stared at me, brows furrowed. I got the idea she was thinking intently, maybe deciding what to make of me. Maybe just judging me.

"Shut up," I said, even though she hadn't spoken.

She followed me to the nearest corner. I peered down the hall. A pair of young beauties knelt beside an open door, bowing to those within. I could barely hear the boss and Takeda talking with Chiyoko inside. They'd keep the madam busy for a while, so I padded back down the other way.

Between the rooms, paper scrolls hung on the walls. Each was a painting, not in the rich oils that decorate Greensteeples and the other noble manors in Egorian, but ink drawings brightened here and there with a few strokes of watercolor. Most showed steep mountains with streams and blossoming trees. A few included traveling figures in wide straw hats, or an old bearded fisherman. One showed a woman ravaged by a devilfish in the surf. I'd seen that image before, one of many exotic paintings in the boss's library.

I raised an eyebrow at that one. Kazuko lifted her chin, but her cool expression cracked. She shrugged, disavowing any personal responsibility for the lewd picture.

More than half the rooms we passed were occupied. Each time the shadows of the men and women inside revealed perfectly innocent behavior. Some of the geisha flirted with their customers, but more often they gossiped about local events, played music, sang songs, or even—I'll be damned—recited poetry. I guess there are guys who pay for that.

Around the far corner I spotted another short passage leading deeper into the compound. I was heading toward it when I saw a shadow against the far wall. I moved

back and peeked around the corner as a couple of geisha emerged from the opposite end.

They moved in tiny steps, seeming more to glide than to walk. The way they held themselves erect inside those tight silk clothes made me think moving at all had to be a struggle. These girls had to be strong and graceful, even as they appeared frail and delicate.

They carried ceramic flasks and steaming bamboo baskets on trays. When they reached the halfway point, I considered retreating to the closest exit. Before I had to choose, they knelt before one of the doors, scratched at the frame, and opened up. I watched as they bowed and dimpled, spoke some courtesies I couldn't overhear, and finally placed first their trays and then themselves into the room. Each gesture was a tiny ritual. I began to see they had more in common with priests than with prostitutes.

I turned to Kazuko and whispered, "I get it now. Geisha."

She rewarded me with a firm, affirmative nod. I gave her the little smile, and this time she didn't look away. If we hadn't been on the job, I'd have taken her chin in my fingers and tried my luck.

With the geisha out of the way, I cat-footed it down the hall. Kazuko kept up. I barely heard the whisper of her steps. I liked those little toe-socks. I wanted to pluck them off her feet the way a lady tugs off her white gloves, one finger at a time.

Much as I liked that thought, I put it out of my mind. The boss could talk for hours, but Takeda needed to find Matano Hideo sooner rather than later. If the actor wore one of the tattoos the Kappa gang were looking for, he'd be a lot happier to see us before he saw them.

The passage to the inner courtyard ended in a heavy door, this one with a serious lock. I couldn't see through the keyhole, but I heard laughter and music from the other side. I caught the sound of a woman crying, but I couldn't suss the direction. I listened for a few more seconds but didn't hear it again.

If I'd been alone, I might have slipped back to go over the roof. I didn't want to leave Kazuko, though, so I gave the door the once-over for security and set to work.

The lock was better than the ones outside, but it was nothing compared to the one I'd cracked on Ichisada's tattoo parlor. I had it open in just over a minute. I could have done it faster, but I liked the feeling of Kazuko's breath on my neck as she leaned over to see me work.

I felt new incentive to get this job done and escort the house servant back to her place. Maybe she'd make me some tea.

The path between the inner and outer courts was full of colorful lights from lanterns hanging beside more of those sliding doors. Those on the outer faces of the building were also made of paper, but the heavy stuff had been lacquered against the rain.



Behind us, a key turned in the lock. I slipped into the shadows beneath a tree, pulling Kazuko in after me. For a second I held her close. She tensed, but when she moved away she didn't go far.

A pair of geisha carrying refreshment trays entered, followed by two more who locked the door behind them. One of them frowned as the key stuck for a moment before she could pull it out. I must have left the lock a bit sticky with my hasty work.

As the four geisha passed, it occurred to me that the two who weren't carrying trays were a trifle taller, and one of them was a little horse-faced. They had plenty of grace, but not the kind I'd seen in the other geisha. These girls moved like street toughs. Then I noticed their hairpins were darts, and the folds of their sleeves concealed some knife-shaped weights.

I'd seen something like that in one of my favorite Trick Alley brothels. The working girls there elected a new boss every year, never the same twice in a row, and they hired no men to be their pimps. They took care of trouble themselves. It helped that they usually employed a sorcerer or two, and a couple of tough gals who came up in my neighborhood, scrapping and stealing to get by.

Seeing the muscle here confirmed my guess that, if the geisha were hiding anyone important, I'd find him in the inner court.

Four open passages connected this central path to the inner garden. After the geisha and their guards disappeared into the inner building, I led Kazuko into the center of the Flower and Willow Pavilion.

The place was bigger than I'd estimated. In addition to the seven willow trees, we found two tiny buildings and a small pond with a tiny bridge. The windows of both buildings were dark, but the door to one of them was tied shut with a thick red cord.

The cords on the other doors hadn't been tied, just draped over the knobs. I was getting a hunch.

I listened at the door but heard nothing. The knot in the cord looked elaborate. I tried to memorize its ins and outs so I could put it back the way I'd found it after I had a peek inside.

"Stop!" called a woman's voice. Two geisha hurried toward us, crossing the little bridge in long strides that showed their gowns weren't so tight after all. They weren't the ones I'd spotted earlier, but I knew these were the guards, not the performing geisha.

Dammit, I thought. I dropped my boots, drew the big knife.

One of the geisha guards drew a dart from her hair. It was longer than I'd guessed, and the gleam of moonlight promised a sharp tip. She said, "You have no right to disturb the water-raising ceremony."

I slit the red cord and slid open the door to the little room. "Oops," I said. "I slipped."

I turned, not sure exactly what I expected to see. A man and woman playing patty cakes, maybe. Matano alone, hiding from the assassins or the constables. No such luck.

The little room was barely bigger than the thick mattress on the floor. A stylized white demon mask with a long wig of silk hair hung on the wall beside a colorful robe. Nearby stood low tables holding up candles that looked like they'd been burning only a short time before getting snuffed.

They weren't the only things that had been snuffed.

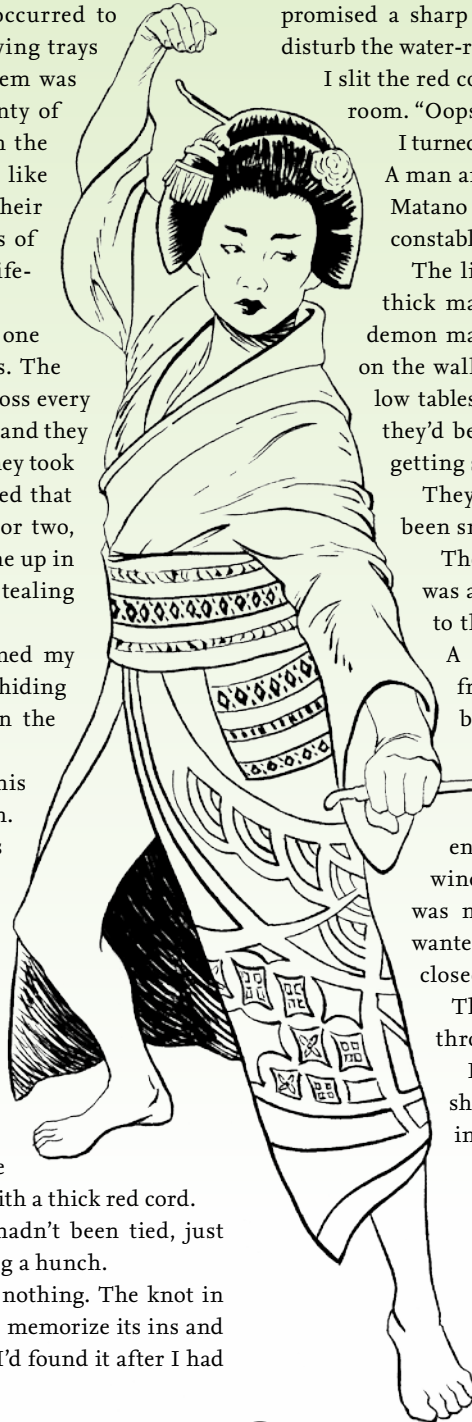
The naked man—Matano, I figured—was another story. He'd been skinned only to the waist, but he'd been stripped deep.

A wide, irregular shape was missing from the skin of his back, the deep borders dark with blood that streamed into pools in the furrows of the mattress.

There was no other entrance to the little house. Three little windows let in the moonlight, but none was much bigger than my open hand. I wanted a better look, but the geisha guards closed in. I turned to face them.

They held up their darts, poised to throw.

I raised my curved Chelish knife and showed them the big smile. If one didn't impress them, I hoped the other would.



*"Not all geisha are performers."*