



## THE RACCOON DOG

### PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: HUSKS 4 OF 6

"I don't have to be this way, doll face."

The first geisha threw her darts. I could have sidestepped, but Kazuko stood behind me. If I moved, she'd take the hit.

Instead I leaned back, pushing Kazuko down as I swept the big knife across what I was betting was the dart's path.

Desna smiled. Two darts missed me completely. The third sang off the side of my knife. I felt it hit my jacket, but it caught in the leather without scratching my pretty copper skin.

Kazuko hustled away, not into the love house with its bloody corpse, but toward the pond in the center of the Flower and Willow Pavilion. I couldn't decide whether that was smart or stupid. The house was a dead end, but now she was out in the open.

The second geisha guard drew a dagger from her sleeve and moved toward Kazuko. With my off hand, I flicked a dart at her. It pierced her skirt and pinned it to the ground. That was perfect. It wasn't her blood I wanted. It was her undivided attention.

Her partner tumbled toward me, producing a couple of daggers as she rolled up to strike. I saw it coming and swept her ankles. She went down where I'd meant to put her. I knelt hard on one wrist and grabbed the other to control her blades. A little grinding and she let go.

"Drop it," I told the other geisha. I'd heard her rip free the hem of her gown. Her shadow approached me, but I didn't look up. I leaned close to the one I'd caught, gave her a good look at my teeth. Her sweat mingled with the smell



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of jasmine, and I thought of a half-dozen other wrestling moves I'd prefer to try out with her.

"Izumi, do as he says."

The second geisha dropped her knives and stepped back. Behind her, Kazuko looked on from the edge of the tiny bridge. Her mouth formed an O of surprise or fear. I hoped I hadn't put her off with the big smile. After all that hard work bringing her around, it would be a shame to waste it.

I got up and offered a hand to the geisha I'd knocked down. "I'm not here to hurt anybody. Call your madame. She's the one who's got some explaining to do."

But Madame Chiyoko didn't need calling. Before the geisha could speak, her boss arrived with mine. Takeda, his samurai, and four more pretty guards came with them.

The geisha accepted my hand. I pulled her up into a brief embrace. I whispered a sweet something to make her blush and watched out of the corner of my eye for Kazuko's reaction. She didn't like it one bit.

I was in.

"How dare you send this foreign devil to break into our private garden?" Madame Chiyoko turned on Takeda, her voice rising like a siren as she built up a good mad. The inspector wasn't looking at her, though. He looked past me at the flayed corpse of Matano Hideo, the actor we'd come to find.

The guy Chiyoko told us wasn't here.

Takeda's face remained calm. As the boss moved into the love house for a look at the body, the inspector stood still. His eyes focused past the crime scene. I'd seen that look a thousand times before, usually on the boss's face. Takeda was looking back at a memory.

Beside him, Chiyoko wailed more abuse until Osamu whirled on her.

"Be silent, you shameful woman!"

His shout made her pause. When she opened her mouth again, he raised his hand to strike her. Before the blow could fall, she dropped to the ground, kowtowing at his feet.

"You must show respect," bellowed Osamu. "You have no right—!"

Shiro moved to one side, catching Osamu's eye. Trembling mad, Osamu glanced at his partner, who shook his head.

Osamu lowered his hand and turned away, still shaking. It had to be more than Chiyoko's lie or her rudeness that made him so angry, but I couldn't figure it without knowing more. And it didn't seem the right time to ask.

I retrieved the dart I'd thrown but kept one eye on the samurai. Kazuko joined me in watching the others.

Takeda conferred with the boss beside Matano's body, while Shiro stepped between Osamu and Chiyoko to question the geisha madame.

She confessed that she knew Matano was inside. Tonight was the occasion of something called the water-raising ceremony. In return for his financial sponsorship, the

wealthy actor had come to take the virginity of the house's newest geisha.

At that bit of news, I raised an eyebrow at Kazuko. I didn't say "whorehouse," but she read it on my face.

"It is not the same." She jutted her lip in defiance. I wanted to bite it, nice and soft.

"The honorable Matano was dead when the girl arrived," said Chiyoko. She had transformed since Osamu yelled at her. Instead of avarice, fear colored her face. "The reputation of the house was at stake! We dared not call for the constables."

"You planned to cover it up?" said Shiro. The younger constable sounded calm, but his lip twitched. "How?"

Chiyoko pressed her forehead onto the ground at his feet. She whimpered, "Please."

"Tell me," Shiro insisted.

"I dare not."

"Say it!" He scuffed his foot, threatening to kick her head. Chiyoko whispered, "The Kappas."

Osamu clutched the scabbard of his katana and charged Chiyoko. He might have drawn the blade and beheaded her, but Shiro stepped between them. The anger on his own face told Osamu that he felt the same way, but he wouldn't let the older man kill the witness.

The boss and Takeda finished in the love house. Osamu opened his mouth to report, but Takeda beckoned him to follow as he walked past Chiyoko. I fell in, Kazuko at my side.

As we wound through the inner and outer halls of the Flower and Willow Pavilion, geisha knelt outside the door to every room. They bowed low, turning as we passed. Not at the group of us, I could tell.

They bowed their heads toward Takeda.

Even as we exited onto the street, more geisha emerged to pay their respects. Takeda ignored them, or pretended to. Arnisant joined us at the gate, heeling to me when I gave him the sign. I fed him the rest of the sausage I'd promised. The boss heard the hound's jaws snap closed. He looked back at us—he doesn't like me feeding Arnisant except for training—but Arni and I put on our innocent faces. Arni's is better than mine.

Takeda didn't stop until we reached the line of rickshaws. When he turned, I could see he'd spent some effort composing his face. Whatever the problem with Madame Chiyoko, it bothered him more than he wanted us to know.

"We were too late," said Takeda. "I must inform Lord Koga immediately of my failure."

Osamu said, "Sir, it is not your fault—"

Takeda silenced him with a glance.

"In my absence, you must guide the honorable Count Jeggare to the Seahorse to look for Square-Head. After I report, I shall learn the address of this moneylender. Theirs are the last of the six tattoos the Kappas seek. Shiro, escort the housemaid to her home."

He said a few more things, but they stopped making sense, so I stopped listening.

Instead, I tried to figure out a way to keep Kazuko with us. I didn't like the idea of her being out of sight. Even forgetting my personal angle, these Kappas might want to eliminate her as a witness to the murder of Yamana.

"Listen," I said. "It's probably better to keep Kazuko nearby. Maybe we'll find some clue that relates to whatever she learned working for Yamana, and she can—what?"

Everyone stared at me. I checked to see whether I had something on my nose.

"What?"

"The language spell has expired," said the boss. "None of the others can understand you."

"All right," I said. "Hit me with another one."

He shook his head. "Not yet. I have only one more prepared. It is prudent to wait until you truly need to speak before casting it. Who knows how long this investigation will last?"

"But I want to say goodbye to Kazuko."

"A trifling matter compared with our pursuit of the killer and the recovery of the pearl husk I have been sent

to recover," he said. "Besides, past experience suggests you needn't speak the language to communicate with women."

He had a point, but I still didn't like it.

He spoke to the others in Minkaian. I saw from their expressions that he'd explained what happened. They finished their conversation without another look at me. It was as if I had disappeared. I didn't matter anymore.

I sidled up to Kazuko, but Shiro abruptly led her away. She glanced over her shoulder, and I saw the disappointment on her face.

"Me, too, sweetheart." I blew her a kiss. She didn't blush. She didn't look away.

I was going to have to find out where she lived and pay a visit when this was all settled.

Takeda sat in a rickshaw and told the lackey to go, leaving Osamu to lead the boss and me to the Seahorse district.

We hustled down the hills of Oda toward the shore we'd seen earlier. The boss filled me in on the way.

"The man known colloquially as Square-Head is a well-known member of the Snake Gang. He often gambles well into the night at an establishment called the Raccoon Dog. I will renew the translation spell on you just before we enter. You will take the lead."

"Got it." The boss usually sent me into dives alone, but sometimes he came along to observe in disguise. It was best that I did the talking in those cases. Street and dive were not, as the boss might say, foremost in his repertoire. "While we're talking Taldane," I said with a nod at Osamu, "what was all that between Chiyoko and Takeda?"

The boss thought about the question for a moment as we jogged behind the samurai. "It is difficult to explain."

"You're always saying I'm smarter than I look."

"It is not a question of intelligence," he said. "It is a question of rank. There is an implied code of discretion among nobles, even those of different lands."

I gritted my teeth. After our last caper, I didn't think we were going to have to do this again.

"I know nothing concrete," he added in a tone kind of but not really like an apology. "Only conjecture based on my observations filtered through my limited understanding of the native hierarchy. Still, it is not my place to discuss what might be Takeda's secret outside of our... that is, with a member..."

"With a commoner." Weeks ago he'd called me his friend for the first time. I'd wondered how long that'd last. Now I had my answer.

He winced before correcting me, "With anyone outside the samurai caste."

I'm the goddamned Prince of Wolves, I thought. But I could never say it. It was a secret I had to keep. Still, it was a hell of a lot more irritating for these counts and samurai to look down on me when I knew that if things had gone down different back in the bad old days, they'd be bowing to me.



*"No wonder the little guy's so happy."*



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We saved the rest of our breath for the run. The boss was half winded by the time Osamu stopped at the end of a narrow street filled with drunks, rickshaw porters, and beggars. An old man pushing a cook-cart called out in Minkaian. Everyone but the beggars ignored him, and he swatted them away as they reached for bowls, hoping he'd fill them out of charity.

People streamed in and out of several of the buildings. Music and laughter came from one. Shouts and the clatter of dice echoed in another. Osamu pointed at that one.

Beside the entrance stood a statue of a comical animal. It looked like a cross between a dog and a badger, but the stripes painted on its smiling cheeks gave it a raccoon's face. What really made it stand out were a pair of giant testicles hanging between its legs. They were so big the bottoms rested on the ground. Those entering the house paused to rub the critter's balls, revealing bright brass underneath the paint.

Lucky dog. I figured him for one of Desna's and knelt down to give his nuggets a good rub. Curious, Arnisant came over and gave the brass balls a sniff.

"Radovan!" The boss choked. "Some decorum, please."  
"Just praying, boss."

He scowled until I stood again. When he turned back to the samurai, I pointed at Arni.

"Stop getting us in trouble."

The wolfhound planted his butt and looked up at me, hoping for a treat. I was out of snacks.

Osamu and the boss wrapped up their conversation. The constable strolled casual-like down the street, pretending to be out on patrol and putting on a brave face when some of the bolder beggars heckled him. They weren't afraid of a lone constable.

"Where's he going?"

"There is an informal agreement between the constabulary and the local gangs. Osamu cannot enter a gambling den without permission from the gang chief."

"I like this town more and more." Zandros the Fair could never get a deal like that from the Hellknights in Egorian. Either the samurai were weaker than I thought, or else the gangs were stronger.

"While I attempt to locate this Square-Head, you blend in and distract any locals who take an interest in us."

"Which one you want? Blend in or distract?"

"Time is of the essence, Radovan. Do as I say."

The hairs on my neck turned to needles.

"Fine."

The boss riffled his scroll at me. My tongue tickled, and I sneezed. He put away the expended scroll and gave Arnisant the signal to stay. I pushed through the door to the gambling den.

Inside the place was thick with smoke. Some of it rolled off braziers hanging from the ceiling. Some crawled up out of long brass pipes a few of the players held close to

their mouths. I didn't recognize the sweet smell, but I could tell from the smokers' half-lidded eyes that it was some naughty stuff.

There were no women inside. Most of the men went shirtless or had their sleeves rolled up to show off tattoos. I'd never seen so many before. They weren't just simple snakes and briars around the biceps or some girl's name inside Shelyn's glaive. On all the exposed skin I saw a regular menagerie of fierce animals and magical creatures, along with knives, dice, chains, cards, darts, and all the other tools of the trade.

One thing I saw a lot was snake tattoos. Each of the men handling the dice and tiles had one, as did about half of the gamblers and the thick-necked guys standing by the doors.

Some of the older men stood around a couple of tall square tables with edges a few inches high. There they played some kind of tile game, with each gambler concealing a dozen or so tiles and adding them one at a time to a maze in the middle of the table.

The other tables were low ovals, and the younger players knelt around them. These ones placed bets as a guy in the middle dropped a pair of dice into a bowl and slapped it onto the table's surface before making a dramatic reveal. He shouted, "Odd!"

I had to be missing something, but there weren't any places painted on the table. I watched for another round or two before deciding it was as simple as it looked. The players were betting against each other, hoping to be in the minority who came away with a pittance while the house claimed the rest.

And the house was raking it in.

"You, foreign devil!" cried a man with copper skin even darker than mine. He had no idea how right he was. "Show your money or get the hell out!"

Only then did I realize I didn't have any of the local coins. The ones on the tables were mostly copper and silver, perforated with a square in the center. I made three big gold coins appear between my knuckles.

"Those shiny enough for you?"

The glitter in the eyes of all the men at the table told me they were.

"What about the long-ears in the fancy clothes?"

At my side, I felt the boss move in, ready to say something.

"Never mind my servant. He's mute." I felt the count's eyes boring into my neck, but he deserved it after all that samurai crap. The gamblers stared doubtfully, so I sweetened the lie with shearing gestures at my mouth and crotch. "A mute eunuch. Snip, snip!"

At that they laughed. Between the joke and my gold, we were going to be friends for a few throws. I grinned, looking at the boss to see what he thought of my humor.

Count Varian Jeggare raised his fist to his chin and shot me the tines.

It took all my will to keep a straight face while the gamblers pulled me to the table. I watched as one of them traded my gold for a double-handful of the local silver. I couldn't look back to see what the boss was doing, or else I'd lose control. I'd never even heard him curse properly, much less make the most vulgar gesture known in Egorian.

"What is that sign?" asked the man beside me, trying to imitate the boss. He was a wiry fellow with a couple of missing teeth.

"It's for good luck."

"Like this?" He threw up his first and last fingers on either side of his chin.

"Perfect."

The houseman held up the dice and shouted out some numbers, some kind of countdown.

The player whose turn it was made his bet, a stack of five coins. All others would come after the throw of the dice.

The houseman dropped the dice into the bowl before slapping it down on the table.

The players cocked their heads, trying to hear which way the dice fell. That was impossible, but trying was another way of praying to Lady Luck. I liked that. The old gal had been pretty good to me.

I tilted my head, too, but just for show. I wasn't listening to the dice but watching the houseman's face. His eyes scanned the bets. I laid down five coins of my own before he called time. When everyone took their hands off the table, he uncovered the dice.

"Even!"

The gamblers cheered. Those of us who'd bet took in a modest win. That was no surprise on my first bet, me a rich foreign devil and all. I expected I'd win a few more before the dice turned.

A serving boy came around with drinks. I bought one and laid it on the back of my hand, slapping my palm on the table to flip the tiny cup into my mouth, where I caught it in my lips and let the liquor shoot down my gullet. It was a stupid trick, but it broke the ice some more. The locals laughed. Behind me, the boss sighed and kept watch on the door as gamblers trickled in and out. He hadn't spotted our man yet.

By the time my turn came around, my coins had grown into a healthy pile. I felt the mood of the table change. Would the houseman put me out now? Or would he draw me in to see how many more of those gold coins I had?

I bet half my stash. Everyone joined in after the roll, but in modest amounts. They were bracing to see me busted.

The houseman revealed the dice. "Even!"

Clever lads. They were taking the long view.

After a couple more turns, the boss brushed my sleeve. I stretched my arms, turning to scan the room. A block-headed fellow had entered the den. He was built like a shipping crate, barely over five feet tall but with shoulders so wide that he had to turn to slip through the narrow

doorway. When he grimaced at the doorman, I saw his teeth all had black gaps between them.

I scratched my neck, the secret sign for "What now?"

The boss scraped one foot across the floor. That meant "Wait and watch."

Knowing he'd keep an eye on Square-Head, I put my eyes back on the game. Before my turn came around, the boss plucked at my sleeve. I glanced back to see Square-Head leaving through a side door. Time to go.

"Thanks for the game, boys." I scooped up my cash.

"Where do you think you're going?" One of the other gamblers rose from his seat.

The houseman said, "You can't leave until you've bet everything you have on the table."

The cheerful atmosphere of the table changed. I'd broken their etiquette. Any other time, I wouldn't have cared. But I was still hoping to wrap this case in time to find Kazuko while the translation spell still worked.

"All right," I said, pushing all my winnings forward. "Make it snappy."

The houseman raised his hand to display the dice. I'd seen his fingers dip below the table an instant earlier, so I knew this was a different pair.

I should have let it go, lost the cash, and pushed away. I could've spared us a lot of grief if I'd done that. I would've done it, if the switch hadn't been so damned obvious.

Should've, would've, could've.

But I was tired of being treated like a jerk. It was bad enough the boss was talking down to me again. I wasn't going to let these mooks rip me and laugh about it.

Nobody supported my bet. They knew better. When the houseman lifted the bowl, his lips formed the word "Odd" before he could even see the dice.

I whipped out the big knife and brought it down like a cleaver on the dice. Chips of bone flew away. The remains of the dice lay on the table, the fat blob of their lead loads exposed for all to see.

"Radovan, don't!" The boss knew it was no use, even as the words came out of his mouth. At the same time, he blew that nice cover I'd given him.

"He's no mute!" shouted the houseman. "You came to cheat us!"

The dog at the door wasn't the only one with brass balls. This guy had some pair to accuse us of cheating with his loaded dice cut open on the table. But there was no point arguing. They showed me their knives. I showed them mine.

The boss drew his sword in one hand, a riffle scroll in the other.

A gambler crept up on my left. I nicked him on the thigh without turning to look at him. That was enough to make him think twice. Two more moved in, but I chased them off with a growl and a couple of feints. Behind me, the boss parted the crowd with a flourish of his blade.



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"Rolling out," I warned the boss.

I snaked my arm around his waist and fell backward, pulling him along. The boss folded his long body, rolling with me. I set him back on his feet within a step of the threshold.

Our quick retreat startled the gamblers long enough for us to back out through the door. There the boss thumbed his scroll. Thick white threads shot out from the riffled edge of the paper. They fattened as they flew into the gambling den, filling the place with a gooey network of webbing.

"Nice," I muttered. Until recently, he'd always been an armchair wizard. It was great to see him cast the spells he once only talked about.

The gamblers screamed curses at us, but they hung like trapped flies among their game tables. I shot them the tines.

The boss brushed the dust off his sleeve and scowled at me for the unwelcome hug. He hates close contact, but he couldn't complain. I'd gotten us out.

I spied our guy strolling off the way we'd come, pretending not to notice the commotion as he passed Osamu, who jogged toward us. The boss made a stirring motion with his thumb and pointed at Square-Head.

Osamu glanced back at Square-Head before nodding at the boss. He turned at the nearest street, waited a moment, and began tailing him. The boss nodded at me, and we followed, knowing we could afford to lose Square-Head as long as we caught up with Osamu.

Shouts erupted from a nearby alley. Those who'd escaped the boss's web streamed out of a side entrance. Seconds later, more armed tattooed men burst out of nearby houses. One look at us told them we were the cause of the trouble.

The boss ran and I followed, tensing at the thought of catching a blade in the back. Two axes whirled past us, one sticking into the corner of a house as we turned down the street Osamu had just left. We had to lead the gangsters away from Osamu and Square-Head. That part was easy. The trick was surviving to catch up with them.

All along the street, shutters opened at our approach and slammed shut as the mob followed. We dodged another flurry of thrown weapons. I caught an axe meant for the back of the boss's head. I meant to throw it back as we turned the next corner, but there we saw Takeda.

The rickshaw that had returned him to the Seahorse was already running away, but the samurai strode forward. He frowned at the sound of the mob behind us, but when they came around the corner he didn't even flinch.

"Too many to fight, Inspector," called the boss. "Come with us."

Takeda walked past us, his frown deepening. He drew the wakizashi from his sash, still in its scabbard. He held it above his head like a scepter of office.

The boss slowed, touching the scrolls in his bandolier to choose the right one. He loved the fireball, but he couldn't use that one around these wooden houses. Still, I couldn't think of another spell I'd seen him cast that would save our skins. I prayed to Desna that he had another of those webs.

The mob slowed at the sight of Takeda, those in the back crashing into the ones up front until they too recognized him. I counted maybe thirty men and didn't like our chances.

"Stand aside!" shouted an old gangster. His sagging breasts made the demon tattooed on his chest look drunk or sleepy. "Those foreign devils cheated us."

Takeda stood as still as a statue, his short sword held aloft.

The gangsters shouted threats, their breath white in the chill air. Little by little, their anger gave in to uncertainty. The blades they held above their own heads began to droop.

One young buck got tired of waiting. He pushed to the front and thrust a shiny butterfly knife toward the inspector.

Takeda put his hand on the grip of his wakizashi.

The rest of the mob dissolved like sea foam, leaving the belligerent young man alone. He looked at his fleeing pals. He looked back at Takeda.

The inspector exposed an inch of his blade.

The young gangster tripped over his own feet and fled.

***"I don't mind grifters. But if you're going to try to cheat me, at least do it well."***

