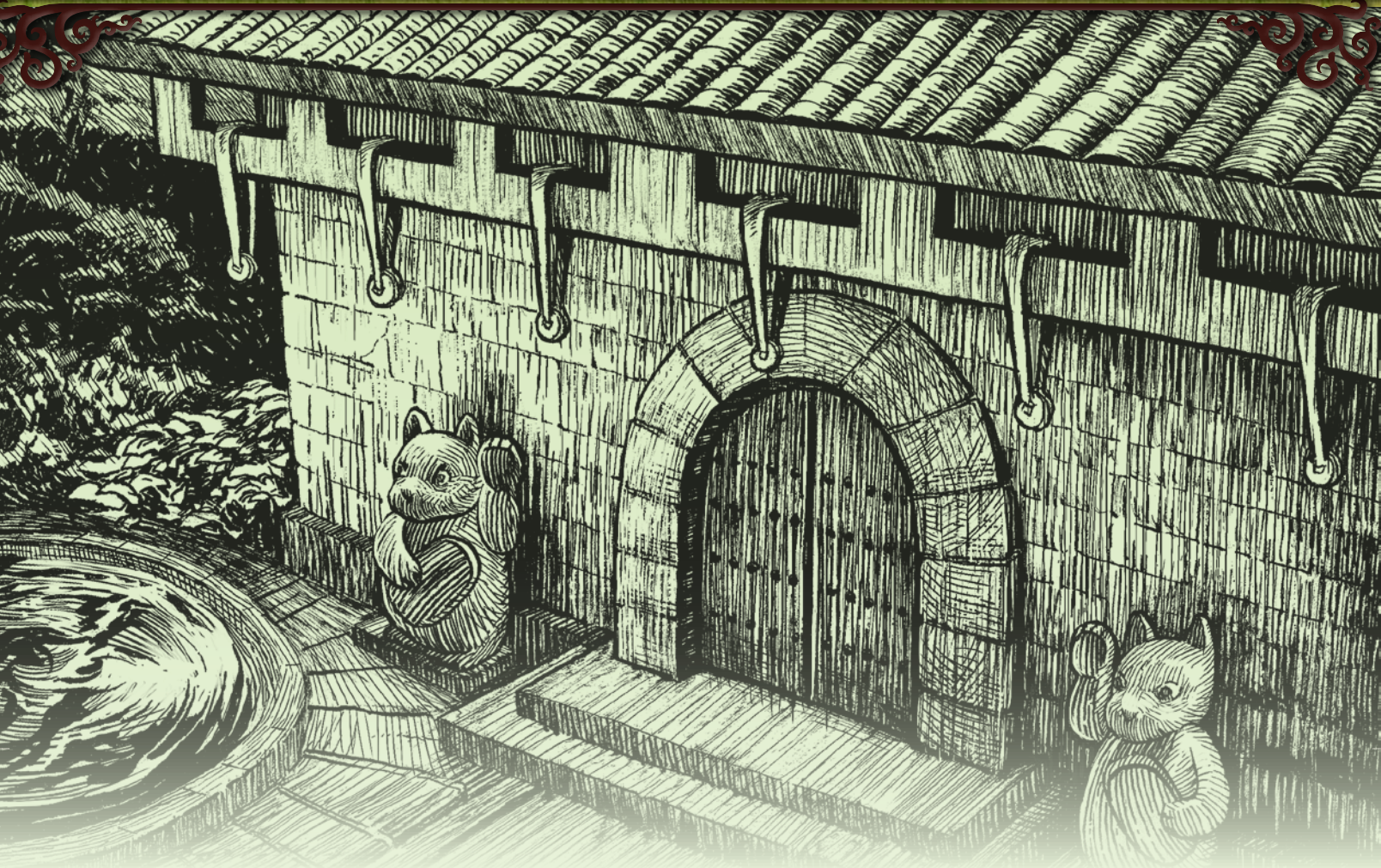


# JADE REGENT



## CRIMSON STRINGS

### PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: HUSKS 5 OF 6

**W**e crouched beside the entrance to a one-story stone building. The boss cupped his hands around his magic ring to illuminate the doorframe. I checked for nasties and gave him the nod to kill the light.

He listened to the conversation inside. Without his pointy ears, all I could make out was the murmur of the men's voices. Now sure it was safe, I pressed my ear to the keyhole.

"...killing everyone with one of his special tattoos. They'll come here soon, Hiroshi."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

At the sound of ripping cloth, I peeked through the keyhole. Neither man was in view, but I saw their shadows against the wall. There was no problem telling which one

belonged to Square-Head. The outlines of his hands held open the moneylender's robes at the chest.

"I know an Ichisada when I see one," he growled. "I recognized your dragon at the bath. What an idiot, to show it off in public!"

"Let go of me. I'll call for the watch."

"The Kappa will hear you first."

"The Kappa? Why—?" Hiroshi the moneylender lowered his voice. "I always pay on time!"

"They killed Ichisada, and now they're going after those who bought tattoos from his secret book. It started when the old Kappa died and his children began fighting over leadership of the gang."

"I don't know about these things," said Hiroshi. His shadow slapped hands over its ears. "I don't want to know!"



## CRIMSON STRINGS

“Too late. They’re coming to flay the tattoos from our skin. We need to leave Oda tonight. Let’s take all the money we can carry.”

“This is a trick to rob me! You mean to steal my—”

“I mean to save my skin. Yours too, if you have the coin to make it worthwhile.”

The boss moved his ear closer to the door, putting his face a few inches from mine. He made the signs for *open* and *quiet*.

While I tickled the lock, the boss closed his eyes to concentrate on the conversation. I wondered how different it sounded to him. It wasn’t just that his hearing was better. He knew the language, even though he’d never visited Minkai before. If he hadn’t cast a whammy on me, I wouldn’t understand a word of T’ien.

Takeda and his men had already slipped behind the building. They’d agreed to wait until the boss signaled or one of the men inside tried to scarp, so I took my time on the door. The hushed voices of the tattooed men covered the scrape of my picks in the lock, and the boss kept listening while I worked. As he’d taught me long ago, we might learn more that way than by interrogating the men.

We already knew a little. After the stir we’d caused in the Seahorse District, Shiro tailed Square-Head—whose name we now knew was Goro—to a neighborhood of single-story houses and shops. That’s where we caught up with him, following the chalk marks he left on the corners of houses each time he’d turned. One look at the place, and Takeda told us it was the shop of the moneylender whose name we’d seen on Ichisada’s list of secret tattoos.

Goro had pounded on the shop door. Above him hung a string of wooden coins, the moonlight turning the gold-and copper-painted discs as dark as blood. The gangster cringed each time he struck the door.

Eventually Hiroshi opened the door, letting a sliver of yellow lamplight fall across the gravel street. He craned his neck to look left and right, but Goro pushed him inside and shut the door behind them.

We kept low and ran to the front door, the boss with a hand on his sword to keep it from rattling in the scabbard. The samurai peeled away to cover the back. Arnisant stayed with us, silent and alert. I was starting to think the wolfhound would make a great lookout for a second-story job.

We’d missed whatever the men inside the house said at first, but they were scared even before Goro mentioned the Kappa. I didn’t know whether they were cowards or the Kappa were just that scary. We hadn’t seen anything but a few footprints from these ninja characters since the first brief attack outside Yamana’s house. My shoulder still itched where they’d hit me with one of their throwing stars.

I felt the tumblers snap into place, louder than I’d expected. I winced, thinking the men inside must

have heard the click. They hadn’t. They’d taken their conversation deeper into the house. I put my ear back to the keyhole, but I couldn’t make out their words anymore. The expression on the boss’s face suggested he still could.

Beside me, Arnisant growled. I followed his gaze to a tail disappearing around the corner of a house across the street. Oda was lousy with cats. They must grow their vermin smaller here than we do back in Egorian, where the giant rats give as much hell as they get from the mousers.

“Hush, Arni.” I put a hand on his back.

I signed a question at the boss. *What do you hear?*

He shook his head and raised a finger. *Wait.*

While I did that, I wondered again what it meant that one look at Takeda and his wakizashi had made a whole mob of gangsters retreat. Was the inspector some kind of master swordsman? The way that last kid fell over himself when the samurai drew his short sword just an inch made me think Takeda had some deadly reputation. But that wasn’t the only possibility. Maybe the gangsters refused to fight him for some other reason. Maybe they’d bought him off. Or maybe he had something over their boss and owned a piece of the action.

There was no way to tell without knowing more about Takeda. The boss had a theory, but he wasn’t sharing it—not that it bothered me. Telling a street-raised hellspawn what was up with the samurai might break the code of silence between blue-bloods, even though the boss had more in common with me than with this inspector from the other side of the world.

All right. It bothered me some. I tried to put it out of my mind.

Arnisant’s gaze moved from where the alley cat had disappeared. He lifted his head to stare at the edge of the roof above us. There was no way the cat could have leaped all the way from the other side of the street. All I saw was a wisp of a cloud over the face of the moon. Still, it made me think maybe Goro and Hiroshi had climbed up into the attic for their little chat. Maybe that’s where the moneylender kept his emergency stash.

The boss signaled, *Go.*

I went in, keeping one hand on the door as I pushed it all the way open to make sure no one stood behind it. Beyond the spare front room were two doorways. The one on the left was closed, as were both shuttered windows I could see. Lamplight revealed the shadows of the men through the open doorway on the right. I slid over to look inside.

Goro still had a handful of Hiroshi’s robe twisted up in one big mitt. Hiroshi grasped the gambler’s wrist in both hands, but his fingers were made for counting coins, not grappling. The moneylender couldn’t have weighed much more than my left arm. I could count his ribs even under the bright colors of the image on his chest.

# JADE REGENT

The dragon wasn't the kind you see on shields and banners back home. For one thing, it didn't have wings. For another, its claws were tiny compared to its snakey body. It had long fishy whiskers and a lion's mane. Its scales weren't all one color, either. They were blue and red and yellow and green and black. In one claw it clutched a scroll, in the other a wand.

"—as much money as we can carry and leave the city." Goro emphasized each phrase by thrusting a stiff finger against Hiroshi's skinny chest. He'd backed the moneylender up against a steel vault bolted to the floor.

Already scared, Hiroshi gaped as he looked past the gambler and saw me in the doorway. He cried, "A demon! They sent a demon!"

I get sick of hearing that sort of thing, so I shot him the tines. He whimpered, probably afraid that I'd hexed him.

The boss moved up beside me. I looked over to see that he'd closed the front door and left Arnisant to guard it. "Calm yourself," he told the man. "We are here to help—"

Goro let go of Hiroshi, whose legs collapsed like boiled noodles. The big gambler ran to the back door and threw open the bolt. The moment he opened it, Takeda and Osamu came in, forcing him back to stand beside the kneeling moneylender. Shiro came in behind them, closing and bolting the door.

"I've done nothing!" Hiroshi tried to cover his chest, but Takeda slapped away his hands.

"That tattoo," Takeda said. "You received it from the artist Ichisada?"

Apparently the samurai hadn't heard as much from the back door as we had through the front.

Hiroshi put his palms on the floor and kowtowed. "Yes, sir!"

"Why this particular tattoo? Was it not expensive?"

"Yes. Yes, it was expensive. But the honorable Ichisada said the dragon would lend me great fortune. And it has! He offered me a bargain price, too. It would have cost far more than I could afford, only—" He hesitated.

"Ichisada owed you money?" said Takeda.

Hiroshi pressed his forehead on the floor.

"And you?" He turned toward Goro. The block-headed gangster sneered, making his scarred face that much uglier, which

was some trick. He wasn't the kind to talk to constables. I respected that, but it wouldn't make our job any easier.

Osamu shoved his face close to Goro's ugly mug. "Answer the inspector!"

Goro hissed, spraying flecks of spittle into Osamu's face. The samurai backed up, his hand gripping his katana. He unsheathed the weapon a few inches, but there wasn't enough room to draw the long sword all the way.

The sight of naked steel was still enough to make Goro think twice. He didn't completely break, though. His gaze flickered over Takeda. He spat on the floor and muttered, "You've got no right. You're nothing but a pimp."

Everyone froze as Goro said the word. On the floor, Hiroshi tucked his arms and legs close to his body, trying to make himself too small to notice. Osamu and Shiro stepped back to draw their weapons. One look at their stone-cold eyes told me that they were ready to execute the man.

I looked to the boss, but he was watching Takeda. The inspector stood still, his face an emotionless mask. I expected him to order his men to stand down, but he said nothing. He only stared through Goro. I knew that look. What he was looking at wasn't in the room.

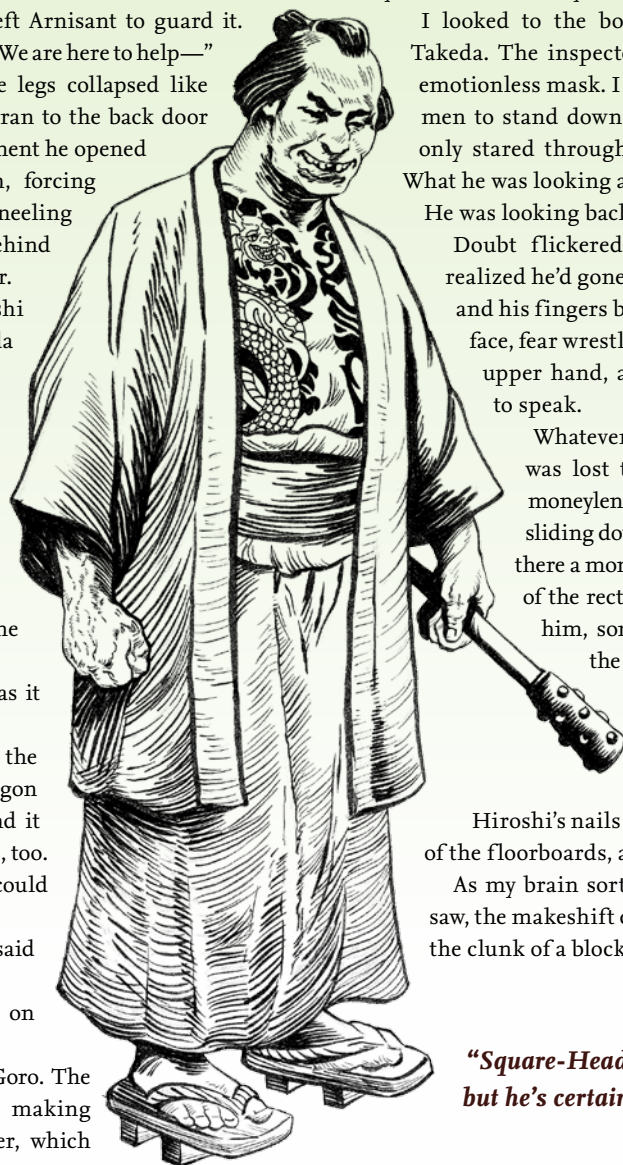
He was looking back in time.

Doubt flickered over Goro's face as he realized he'd gone too far. His lips twitched, and his fingers began to shake. All over his face, fear wrestled with pride. Fear got the upper hand, and he opened his mouth to speak.

Whatever he might have said was lost to Hiroshi's scream. The moneylender fell through the floor, sliding down a chute that hadn't been there a moment earlier. On three sides of the rectangle that opened beneath him, someone had sawed through the wood without making a sound. The fourth side bent like a hinge, and I could see a wedge had been cut from below.

Hiroshi's nails scratched the broken edge of the floorboards, and then he was gone.

As my brain sorted through what my eyes saw, the makeshift chute closed again. I heard the clunk of a block shoved under the wood.



**"Square-Head isn't the brightest, but he's certainly got guts."**



## CRIMSON STRINGS

Beneath the house, Hiroshi's screams rose high and shrill.

Goro lost the last of his nerve. "The Kappa! The Kappa!"

From the front room came a deep growl. I looked back to see Arnisant staring at the peaked ceiling. There was no attic up there, only exposed beams beneath the roof. Behind the hound, the front door shuddered but didn't open. Shiro shoved the back door with his shoulder, but it didn't budge. He unbolted it and tried again, but whoever was outside had jammed that one, too.

Beside me, the boss fumbled with the pouches on his bandolier and came up with a pair of riffle scrolls.

"They'll kill us all!" screamed Goro.

"Shut up."

He kept screaming. I was about to slug him when a stream of dust rained down on his face. He shook his head, confused.

I grabbed him by the sleeve, but it was too late. His arm shot up. Between his wrist and the ceiling, I saw a glimmer of steel chain.

Before he could scream again, Goro flew up to the ceiling, kicking. One of his feet caught me in the face. The other struck the boss's shoulder, knocking the riffle scroll out of his hand.

Takeda leaped up, the steel of his wakizashi flashing in the lamplight. The blade sparked on metal but didn't sever the chain. By the time the Inspector's feet hit the floor, Goro's left arm had disappeared through a hole in the roof.

Two more hooked chains shot down, and now I could see the tiny holes they came through. One chain caught Takeda's sword, but he twisted the blade free before it could tighten. The second wrapped around Goro's right arm, holding him tight against the canted ceiling.

Shiro and Osamu threw themselves against the back door, but whatever the Kappa had done to block it held up to their full weight and strength.

As the boss came up with his dropped scroll, I ran to the nearest window. It took me a second to throw the bar and open the latch. The moment I touched the windowpane, the whole thing exploded in my face. I whirled away, too late to cover my eyes from the flash. My face burned, and wood splinters stuck deep beneath my skin. I clawed away thick scraps of burning paper.

Takeda shouted a warning to stay away from the windows, which was real helpful. I heard the riffling sound of one of the boss's scrolls and then a whoosh of flame nearby.

"No fire!" called Takeda.

The boss sighed but said, "Yes, yes." I heard him plucking at his pouches as I probed my eyes. There were no splinters in them, but my eyelids were hot and tender. A little fire is all right by me—even a hot poker doesn't do much more than tickle—but this was more than a little fire. Some thick, wet gunk clung to my face, and that's what burned.

Still, I didn't feel the change coming on, that maddening pain that turns me into a full-on fiend when I've been immolated.

I was plenty mad, all right, but I didn't feel half my mind slipping away the way I did when dropped on a bonfire or lit up by one of the boss's fireballs. If the flash at the window had been a little hotter, lasted a little longer, then whoever was outside the house wouldn't have been happy when I came out to play.

I couldn't decide whether I was relieved or disappointed.

"Here," said the boss. He poured cool liquid over my eyes. Blinking, I saw his fretful expression fade as he realized I could see again. He put the potion bottle in my hand and chose another scroll. I drank the syrupy stuff and pulled a few splinters out of my face.

By the time I was back in action, Takeda and Osamu were up onto the furniture and pulling down on Goro's suspended body. The gambler had screamed himself hoarse, and then all at once he screamed louder than ever as a torrent of blood poured down from the hole that captured his left arm.

The chains holding him went slack. Goro's one-armed body fell to the floor, bringing the samurai with him. Takeda leaped back up, catlike, to thrust his sword through the hole in the roof. He didn't seem to hit anything. Osamu slipped in the blood, falling down beside the glistening red chains.

"Radovan!" The boss indicated the window I'd failed to open. His fire spell had burned through the wreckage, leaving a hole that might just be big enough.

I ran two steps and dove through the opening. I hit the ground and rolled up to my feet, throwing myself to the right for good measure. Nothing hit me, but I kept moving toward the rear of the house. There I found a pair of black-garbed men, their faces covered with those same leathery masks we'd seen outside Yamana's house. The ninja crouched over Hiroshi's flayed body. One of them held a roll of the moneylender's skin, blood dripping from either end. Beyond them, another ninja dashed down the street, cradling Goro's severed arm close to his body.

I threw my darts. The ninja holding the bloody scroll of flesh turned his back, catching the darts in his own body rather than let them strike his prize. The other flung a big white stone at me. I swatted it away, but it exploded on my wrist. It wasn't a stone but an eggshell. Instead of a flash, this one burst into a stinging cloud of pepper. I shut my eyes and held my breath, but it was too late. The stuff burned my eyes and got up my nose. It was all I could do to breathe.

Blind again, I ran back around the corner of the house. I took the big knife in hand, put my back against the wall, and listened for a step on the gravel. Considering how quiet these guys had been, I knew I couldn't count on that. Blinking and weeping away the pepper, I lost my patience and stabbed a few times at empty air.

# JADE REGENT

Someone hit the ground beside me, near the open window. "It is I," hissed Shiro. After a moment, he added, "Are you all right?"

"Blind. Two around the corner."

"Wait here."

The boss came out next. I could almost see his tall figure through my tears, so that was something. He put the last of the potions in my free hand and moved toward the front of the house. A moment later I heard the door opening. The boss commanded Arnisant to fetch. A few moments later, the hound cried out and the boss shouted, "Arnisant, come!"

My sight was coming back, so I saved the potion for later. Goro and Hiroshi were past saving, and there was no catching up to the ninja after they'd hit Arnisant with one of their pepper bombs. The hound whimpered and pawed at his nose while the boss poured water over his big brown eyes and dabbed them with his handkerchief.

Soon we were back where we started, standing beside Hiroshi's corpse while lights went up in all the nearby houses. A night patrol answered the call of Shiro's whistle within a few moments, but they hadn't seen the ninja. The bastards got away with Hiroshi's dragon and Goro's whole arm.

Takeda and the boss examined the bodies while the local constables pored over the house and climbed up to study the roof.

"What a disaster," Shiro muttered. I remembered then that there'd been something I wanted to ask him. Once we got out of this mess, I hoped to pay a visit to Yamana's cute little housekeeper, but I didn't know where she lived.

"At least you got Kazuko back home before things turned ugly." He'd returned pretty quickly from that unwanted errand. "She must have lived pretty close, huh?"

"Not too far."

I didn't like the way he hesitated before answering. "You took her all the way home, didn't you?"

"Well, she said I should get back to help—" began Shiro. Before he could finish, Takeda and the boss came out of the house. I could almost see the steam coming off of the count.

He yanked Ichisada's ledger out of his satchel and flipped through the pages, tearing the corner off a page in his hurry. This was the guy who put on white gloves before touching a new addition to his library.

"How stupid of me," he groaned.

I thought of two or three funny things to say to that. Instead I asked, "What?"

"Did you notice which of Goro's arms the Kappa appropriated?"

Goro had lost his left arm. The fact that the boss asked the question made me look inside the house at the gambler's body. Definitely the left arm.

"Is that not strange?" said the boss. Takeda frowned as if he already knew the answer.

Osamu and Shiro looked as clueless as I felt. Then I realized the obvious.

"They took Yamana's left arm, too."

"Why would they need two left arms?" said Osamu. One of the constables who'd been on the roof approached to show him a strip of cloth.

"They do not," said the boss. His finger traced the names on the secret page in Ichisada's ledger. "In my haste to show the inspector this list so that he might identify Goro and Hiroshi, I neglected to examine it myself. Yamana's name is not among those who received Ichisada's special tattoos."

The inspector was the one who had examined the list back at the tattoo parlor. His expression faltered between surprise and anger.

"The responsibility is mine," he said. "I did not notice. I thought only of the new names."

Shiro and Osamu lowered their heads, sharing their leader's shame.

"You have been working without rest for days," said the boss, throwing him a bone. Takeda wasn't having it.

"The clue is so obvious, there can be no excuse for my failure."

"If that is true, then the failure is equally mine," said the boss. "Had I but spent a few moments longer to examine the page myself, I would have noticed the discrepancy."

"No," said Takeda. "You were right to proceed in haste. Once we knew the names of the surviving recipients of the Ichisada tattoos, it was imperative to act quickly. You have acted correctly."

"By that logic, you too were correct to press on with your investigation despite the fatigue that clouded your perception. If I have acted correctly, then so have you."

Takeda startled, realizing the boss had maneuvered him into excusing his own mistake. He bowed. Beside him, his men did the same, grateful that my boss saved face for their boss.

These pantomimes of mutual admiration were getting old. I looked to Arni for commiseration, but he sat at attention, eyes on the boss.

"All right, now that we're all correct, will somebody tell me why these ninja cut off Yamada's skin? Did he have a tattoo or not?"

"It does not matter," said the boss. "We were meant to think he did, distracting us from the true object of the Kappa gang's theft."

"This pearl the Decemvirate sent you to fetch."

The boss scowled at last word, but he nodded. "The pearl is infused with the residual power of the wish magic it once contained. It can still infuse other items of magic with its energy. It is reasonable to surmise that the Kappa wish to activate the full power of the tattoos they have stolen only after they have gained all six."



“To do what?”

“Ichisada told the moneylender that the dragon tattoo would grant him great fortune, although without a catalyst such as the celestial pearl, no doubt its powers were limited. Each of the designs must have a unique quality. Combined, the complete set could be far more powerful than the sum of its parts. That is why Ichisada spread them among many different subjects: to ensure that no one person held the power of all the tattoos combined.”

“This conjecture is sound,” said Takeda.

“Inspector.” Osamu bowed and offered Takeda a scrap of cloth the other constable had given him. It was twisted tight like a tourniquet, and blood stained the loop where they’d cut off Goro’s arm.

The boss arched an eyebrow and raised a hand above the cloth. Takeda nodded his permission, and the boss plucked something out of the fabric. He rolled a tiny object between his fingers and sniffed it before offering it to Arnisant to smell.

“Find,” said the boss.

Arnisant put his nose to the ground and snuffled. He searched along the street until he nosed one of the footprints. The boss knelt beside it and reached down to pluck something out of the gravel. I leaned in for a better look as he compared the two objects.

They were tiny fragments of straw, not much bigger than a grain of rice. Their edges were fresh and sharp where they’d been cut. While the boss showed them to me and Takeda, Osamu and Shiro collected more of the stuff as Arnisant sniffed it out from the ninja’s footprints.

“The uniformity of these cuts suggests a manufacturing process,” said the boss.

“The Tatami House,” suggested Takeda. “The blades they use to trim the reeds could leave fragments like these.”

“Is this establishment under the control of the Kappa?”

“It lies within their territory.”

“Assuming the Kappa have recovered all six tattoos, they can now activate them with the husk.”

“They still need one from a right arm,” I said. “What’s the name on Ichisada’s list?”

The boss tucked the ledger back into his satchel. Now that he’d taken a good peek, he didn’t need to look at it again. “The sixth name listed is simply Shinju, with no family name.”

“Shinju.” Shiro glanced at his superior before casting his eyes down. “Is that not the name of the Master Kappa’s daughter?”

After a moment’s consideration, Takeda nodded once. “It is.”

“Oh, hell.”

The revelation hit me like a gut punch. I turned it over in my head a few more times before deciding there was no

better explanation. She’d been at the scene of the murder, and the Kappa backed off only after they saw her come out of Yamada’s house. Then she sent Shiro away rather than pretend to return to a house where she didn’t live.

The others looked at me, waiting for the explanation I didn’t want to give. I took a deep breath and told them, “Kazuko is Shinju. She’s been playing us from the start.”

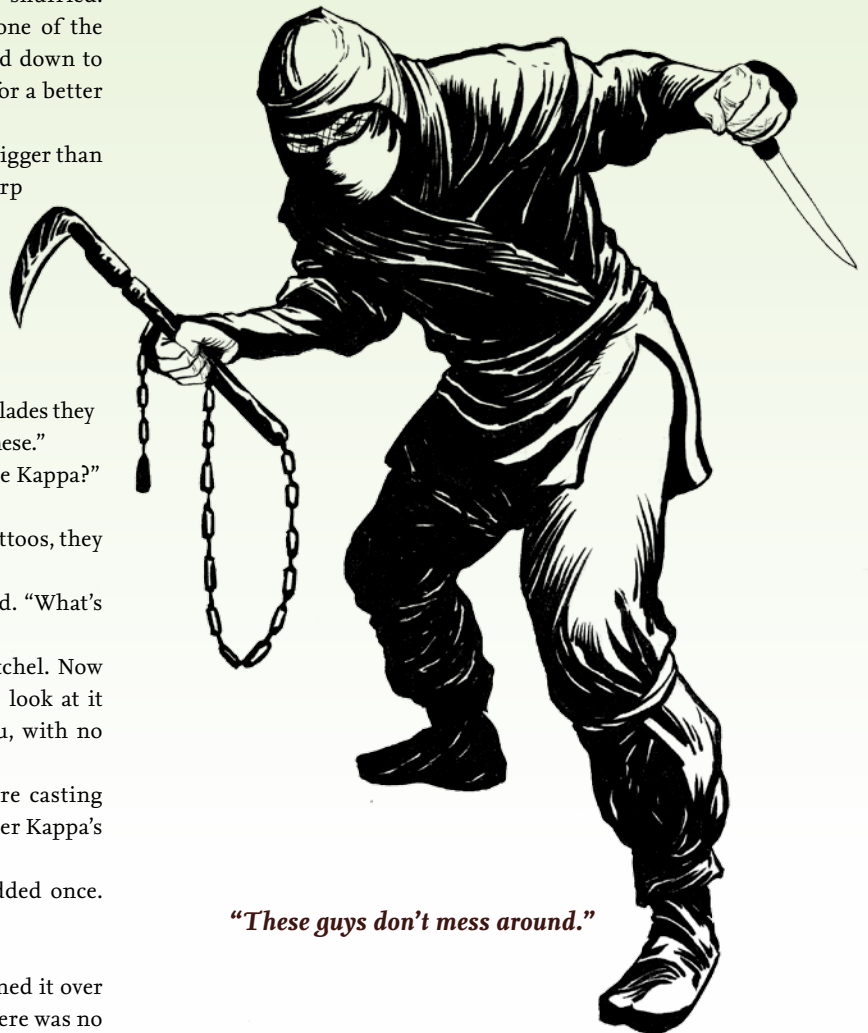
Takeda and Osamu squinted at me. My word wasn’t good enough for samurai. But Shiro’s face dropped as he also realized how he’d been duped.

“Honorable Count Jeggare,” began Takeda. “No member of the Kappa would have remained to be caught at the scene of a murder. Surely your man has misjudged—”

“No,” said the boss. “Radovan is correct. Kazuko—or Shinju—has used us for her own ends.”

“I do not understand,” said Takeda.

“There is no time,” said the boss. “Lead us to this Tatami House, and pray we arrive before the Kappa can activate the power of these stolen tattoos.”



*“These guys don’t mess around.”*