

# JADE REGENT



## MANTLE OF STOLEN FLESH

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

I'm going in."

"Wait." The boss put a hand on my arm, pulling me away from the warehouse window.

Takeda made a sound deep in his chest, barely audible over the drumming from inside the building. He didn't like what we saw in there any better than I did. Still, he crouched beside the slit I'd cut through the paper window—someone had boarded the place up, but there'd still been enough space between the planks for my knife to do its work. He glanced back at the lane curving down to the three gray wooden buildings that formed Tatami House. There was still no sign of Shiro, Osamu, or the reinforcements they'd been sent to fetch.

I hoped we could trust the men. If even one of them was a Kappa agent, we were in a deep pile.

We'd ignored the other two buildings when we heard the rhythmic chanting from the one farthest from the street. It was a nice place for a murder, I thought. Or for some infernal ritual, which is what it looked like they were having tonight.

"Look at what they're doing to her," I said. "I was wrong, all right. Kazuko isn't a Kappa."

Beside me, Arnisant shifted but kept quiet. His eyes were locked on the boss, waiting for instructions. He's a better dog than I am.

"You were not wrong," the boss said. "Watch."

I gritted my teeth and peered back inside.

The building was tall but only one floor, with high ceilings. Heavy wooden beams supported a system of rolling chains and pulleys near the rafters. From some

of the chains hung stacks of thick reed mats, too heavy to move by hand. When I looked at the mats, the spell that let me understand the local language brought the word “tatami” to my mind. For once during this crazy night, the name of the joint we were visiting wasn’t some kind of poem.

Tall stacks of finished mats formed mazes at the far ends of the building. Against the walls stood low tables piled one atop the other, some with thin, half-woven tatami still pinned in place. Crammed between them were bundled reeds, bolts of cords, and toolboxes.

The big frames sat up on their sides at an angle. Dozens of thin wooden legs stuck up from their faces. On one lay the beginnings of an extra-thick mat. Six of these frames stood end-to-end on the far wall. Together, they looked like a giant centipede curling up to die.

In the middle of it all, thirty or forty men knelt and beat hand drums in time to their chanting. From their dark clothes, I knew they were the Kappas, a gang of killers known in these parts as ninja. They surrounded a cleared space lit by red and yellow lanterns hanging from the rafters. Around their waists they wore hooked chains and short swords. On their faces were dark masks. We’d been watching long enough that I recognized the material: stained human flesh.

I didn’t like that, and not because I hadn’t seen it before.

The cultists had peeled down their robes to the waist, revealing their tattoos. Some were covered everywhere but their hands. Others had only two or three tattoos, but all wore the same figure on the right sleeve: a sort of goblin with a turtle’s shell and, atop its skull, a bowl-shaped dent sloshing with water. Kazuko had told me the creature was called a kappa.

In the center of the kneeling men capered a brown skeleton of a man with a strip of dirty cloth slung between his legs. He also wore a mask, only his wasn’t dyed black. It was stitched together from the faces of five or six different guys, each with a different color skin. Weedy patches of hair stuck out here and there. I made out a blob of a nose on one cheek, a withered ear on the other. The gaunt man jabbered as he danced around a wicker basket set on a low table. He shook a bloody knife above his head, yawping as he speckled the faces of the nearest Kappas. He turned to the first of his captives and grinned.

Bound by his wrists and ankles to one of the large tatami frames, the naked young man could barely stand up straight. He jutted his chin, but fear gnawed at his eyes. He kept glancing down at a heavy wooden mallet on the floor beside him. Like the kneelers, he had a kappa tattooed on his right sleeve.

On the legs of the next frame hung dripping hunks of human flesh, draped open to show off their tattoos.

I recognized the dragon from the chest of Hiroshi the moneylender. Beside it hung the skin of an arm tattooed with an octopus with wicked hooks at the end of its tentacles. Beneath the dragon hung a phoenix tattoo cut from someone’s back. Beneath them were two long strips of flesh, one with a yeti, the other a tengu.

They were all but one of the tattoos from Ichisada’s secret book. They’d have been beautiful on living skin. But it was what hung from the third rack that turned my guts to ice.

The gaunt man had already done his work on Kazuko. He’d flayed the skin of her torso, legs, and left arm. She should have been dead, but she arched her back and craned her neck. The twine binding her to the tatami frame creaked. The only mercy was that her long black hair covered her features, sparing us the sight of her agonized face.

“We can still save her,” I insisted. “Get her to a healer. I’ve got a healing potion right here.”

“It’s no use,” said the boss. “There are too many Kappas to fight.”

“You could drop a great big fireball on them.”

“No,” hissed Takeda. “You will burn down half the city.”

“Understood,” said the boss. “Notice the woman’s right arm.”

I’d seen it. Kazuko had a kappa on her right arm, a fancier version of the monster tattooed on all the ninja and the man bound across from her. I’d seen it before in Ichisada’s book. I’d also had a good enough look at the bound man’s face to notice the family resemblance. He had to be Kazuko’s brother.

“It need not be this way!” he cried. “We can rule the Kappas together.”

The gaunt man cackled.

“No, you alone will be Master Kappa,” whined the bound man. “I will be your servant. Just let me live!”

The gaunt man covered the man’s mouth with his palm and uttered a few words. He removed his hand to reveal a festering wound where the brother’s lips had been. His jaws worked, but I could barely hear his muted grunts.

“Monsters,” muttered Takeda. “All of them.”

“I don’t care if Kazuko’s one of them,” I said. I couldn’t look away from her ruined body. “The kid doesn’t deserve to die like that.”

Takeda looked up the street again, but there was nothing to see. From the look on his face, I wondered whether he was questioning the loyalty or competence of his men. Even if I wasn’t wrong about Kazuko, that didn’t mean she was the only Kappa who’d fooled us. Takeda returned his gaze to the ritual. “We must wait for reinforcements. The three of us cannot—”

The gaunt man removed the lid of the basket to reveal a pearl the size of his head. It wasn’t actually a pearl, I

# JADE REGENT

realized, but an eggshell-thin globe of the iridescent colors you see inside an oyster shell. The gaunt man reached for the mallet.

“No,” said the boss. “Not the husk!”

He yanked a board away from the window with a squeal of old nails. The sound turned the heads of the Kappas toward us.

Without hesitating, Takeda pulled away another board. I cut away the last of the paper window with three quick strokes of the big knife. Before I could stop him, the boss clambered through.

Takeda bumped into me as we both tried to get through the window at once. I growled him off and shoved my way through.

The Kappas shrugged their arms back into their sleeves and scattered toward the dark corners of the room. A few flung chains toward the rafters and floated up like spiders, snuffing out half the lights as they went.

That was all right by me. The boss had keen eyes on account of having an elf for a father, and I could practically see in the dark thanks to whatever the hell it was my ancestors took to bed. I avoided looking directly at the ninja creeping along the stacks of tatami mats, hoping they’d think I couldn’t spot them.

What they didn’t know could definitely hurt them.

Two Kappas rolled a couple of eggs across the floor. They wobbled like skittles, only we were the pins.

I pulled the boss out of their path. As the grenades burst against the wall, I squeezed my eyes shut, expecting a blinding flash or pepper. Instead, the eggshells exploded into sickly sweet clouds. I caught a snootful before I could hold my breath. The stuff made me woozy, even after I staggered out of the cloud.

A couple of smart slaps helped shake off the sleep powder. I returned the favor until the boss said, “Enough! We must prevent—”

The sound of the mallet crushing the husk cut him off. The sleep powder cleared, and we saw the gaunt man raise a double handful of iridescent dust from the basket. He held it before Kazuko and blew. The cloud glittered around her, and shining motes clung to her raw flesh. Her shriek pierced my ears like broken glass.

I filled my hands with knives.

The boss drew his sword in one hand, a rattle scroll in the other. He pointed the little sheaf of paper at the gaunt man and thumbed the edge. The face of each page glimmered with a fraction of an arcane rune, and four bolts of energy shot from his hand.

The gaunt man stared down at the oozing wounds on his chest and drew a few symbols of his own in the air.

A ninja rushed the boss. I stepped in to take that dance. The Kappa didn’t waver when I threw him the big smile, so I drew one just like it under his chin.

The boss threw another volley of magic at the gaunt man, but the bolts splashed and vanished against an invisible barrier.

“Hit him,” said the boss.

I threw the little knife. It struck just as the masked man finished casting another spell. The blade glanced off his body, like the ninja’s stars had bounced off the boss. The gaunt man turned away to reach for the stolen tattoos.

Nearby, Takeda moved in. Before he’d gone two steps, a blur shot down from the rafters. He flicked his wrist, barely moving his sword. Throwing stars glanced off his blade and stuck in the wall.

The floor creaked behind me. I whirled to the side. My spur caught a ninja’s sleeve and pulled his sword a few inches out of line, sparing me a real bad haircut. I followed with the big knife, cutting deep into his kidney. A warm spray wet my hand as I jerked the blade free. The body sagged to the floor.

The boss parried a slash from a Kappa I’d missed. I moved to help, but one I hadn’t spotted swept my legs. I twisted my fall into a roll. The heavy blade of one of those scythe-weapons stabbed the floor where my neck would have been if I were a little slower. In the time it took the Kappa to tug it free, I put the big knife in his neck. My hands were getting slippery.

The boss retreated from three Kappas. The newcomers bound up his blade with their chains while the third raised his sword. I lunged toward him, but there wasn’t time. “Boss!”

A dark blur passed over his head, knocking the swordsman to the ground. The man uttered a strangled cry as Arnisant’s jaws closed on his throat.

Good boy.

I went for one of the ninja with the chains. They both saw me coming and skipped away like kids at a ribbon dance, their chains winding around the boss.

The boss caught my eye and signaled, *Stand clear.*

I faded back as he riffled another scroll. He grabbed a chain.

Sparks danced across the metal links. His hair lifted as if he were underwater, and his jaws clenched in an agonized rictus. The Kappas dropped their chains and fell back, bodies jerking in shock. I finished one and moved in to kill the other, but Arni had already taken him out.

Very good boy.

Takeda gutted two of his attackers with a sweep of his blade. When the third raised a grenade to hurl in his face, the inspector cut off his hand before he could release it. The Kappa wailed and clutched his stump.

I stopped worrying about Takeda and stuck close to the boss. He staggered from the shock of his own spell, but kept on his feet as he shrugged off the slack chains. He paused to fetch another scroll.

"Keep moving, boss." I took my own advice and tumbled forward as several throwing stars sank into the floor behind me.

The boss thumbed his riffle scroll. Before he finished, a throwing star caught him in the back. He set his jaw and kept the small sheaf of paper in hand. As the last page snapped free, two more throwing stars hit him. They bounced off his shoulder and neck, repelled by magic.

"You got one of those for me?" I asked.

He grimaced an apology.

We kept moving toward the gaunt man. The Kappas showered us with steel. They leaped from every shadow, but I saw them, Arnisant smelled them, and Takeda had lightning in his veins. Between us, we stopped the ninja from reaching the boss, giving him time to snap off a few more scrolls. I felt the prickly energy of his magic settle into my body, making me stronger, faster. Maybe even prettier, I don't know.

Kazuko screamed louder than ever. The pearl dust sparkled on her exposed muscle. I couldn't help thinking the stuff must have felt like salt on an open wound. The gaunt man tossed a piece of the tattooed skin toward her. It floated through the shimmering cloud to settle on her raw chest, its edges settling neat against the border of skin at her throat. In an instant, the magic of the pearl dust sealed the flesh in place. The dragon I'd seen on Hiroshi now coiled between Kazuko's breasts.

Her cries grew louder, but they weren't screams of agony. She threw back her head in ecstasy.

"More!" she wailed. "Give me the entire mantle!"

The gaunt man raised his arms above his head. The remaining tattoos rose off the tatami rack, floating like jellyfish on the tide. They moved onto Kazuko's body and fixed there, edges sealing with a sucking sound.

Takeda cut his way free and went straight for Kazuko. The gaunt man stepped into his path, raising his hand as if to command the samurai to halt. Whatever magic protected him earlier did nothing against Takeda's wakizashi. Half the man's hand hit the floor moments before his masked head joined it.

Takeda raised his sword to strike Kazuko. She kicked him in the belly, the rope bonds around her ankle snapping like thread. The samurai flew back, crashing against the man bound to the opposite table. The slender legs of the rack impaled Kazuko's brother, but his body spared Takeda the same fate.

Kazuko held up her foot for a second, like an acrobat showing off after a smart move. I saw the yeti tattooed on that leg and figured that one gave her strength. With a shrug, she snapped her remaining bonds. Smiling, she turned toward us.

She brought her foot down, smashing the wooden floor. The force of her step shook the building. I let myself fall

and rolled with it, heading for the shadows. I wouldn't be the only one in the darkness, but I was betting I'd be the only one who could see in there.

The boss fenced with another ninja while Arnisant protected his back. Takeda stood, raising his sword once more.

As if they'd been waiting for the dramatic moment, the city constables broke in through the doors and windows. Osamu was one of the first in. He shouted, "In the name of Lord Koga, I order you to surrender!"

Naked but for her stolen tattoos, Kazuko stood without a trace of fear or shame. "No. Throw down your weapons, or suffer the same fate as your commander."

She thrust her left arm toward Takeda. The tentacles of the octopus tattoo shot out of her flesh, swelling to the size of mooring ropes. One encircled the inspector's blade. The others arched around him, their hooked ends tearing through his clothes.

"No!" Shiro screamed as he rushed forward. He hadn't made it halfway across the floor before a pair of Kappas intercepted him. In an instant, Osamu was by his side. Their katanas flashed against the ninja's blades.

Constables rushed in to fight the rest of the Kappas. Now it was the ninja who were outnumbered, but the first wave of police fell back before a flurry of throwing stars and flash grenades. Two or three screamed as hooked chains caught them around the neck and pulled them toward the ceiling.

The boss fumbled with his scrolls again, hesitating before he triggered one. I saw his lips form an apology as a stream of fire roared from the riffling pages toward Kazuko.

"Fire!" yelled the constables. They showed less fear of the ninja than of the flame.

They didn't need to worry. As the ray of flame reached Kazuko's body, the dragon on her chest opened its jaws and sucked down the fire, leaving only a trail of smoke.

"No fire!" cried Takeda. Two of Kazuko's tentacles held him high off the floor. He twisted his wakizashi, slicing through the tentacle that tried to steal his blade. He reversed his grip and threw the blade like a spear. It shot down toward Kazuko's breast, impaling her through the heart.

I felt a pang of regret as I saw his blade emerge from her back. Then the phoenix tattoo glowed like the sun at dawn, dazzling my eyes. I heard another sucking sound. My vision returned just as Kazuko hurled Takeda's sword to the floor. In the waning glow of the phoenix, I saw her flesh heal around the wound.

"I cannot die," she said, bringing Takeda closer. "The same is not true of you."

Five of the tentacles arched up like serpents. Their razor hooks sliced through his skin. At the first cuts,

# JADE REGENT

Takeda set his jaw in silence, but as the hooks tore away his flesh, he could not help but scream.

"Of all the samurai in Oda," said Kazuko, "only you are worthy of admiration. You are the sacrifice I must make before assuming the mantle of leadership."

She flayed him before our eyes. A mist of blood obscured his body, but as it cleared I saw that all the skin on his torso was gone. Kazuko cast him away, her tentacles reaching for the nearest constables.

"Inspector!" cried Shiro. He overran his opponent, trampling the ninja even as his foe stabbed him in the thigh. Osamu dispatched Shiro's attacker with a thrust to the heart. As he opened his guard, Osamu's own foe slashed him across the belly. The samurai fell to his knees.

Shiro hesitated, torn between helping his master and his friend. Osamu waved him forward.

"Go," he wheezed.

It didn't matter. Shiro could never have gotten back in time. The ninja raised his blade to decapitate Osamu. Before letting the mortal strike fall, the masked man looked to Kazuko.

Kazuko smiled, pleased that the man awaited her permission before executing an officer of the law. She flung away the constables in her tentacles. Their bodies crashed into the walls and slumped to the floor. As if we'd all received the same unspoken command, everyone stopped fighting and looked at the woman clothed in monsters.

There was no magic in it. I could have moved, but I froze, waiting for the right moment. It would be a simple thing to move forward and put the big knife in her spine. But after seeing the phoenix tattoo save her life from Takeda's mortal blow, I didn't think I could put her down for good.

Not by myself, anyway.

I had an inkling of what might do the trick, but I didn't want to give away my position. When the boss stood up and sheathed his sword, I hoped he was thinking the same thing. He likes to say I'm smarter than I look. The question was whether I was just smart enough that he could guess what I was thinking.

He walked toward Kazuko, Arnisant at his heel. I reckoned he could see me, but he didn't so much as glance in my direction.

"Mistress Kappa," he said. "I see that your clan's symbol lends you great cunning. Rarely have I witnessed such daring manipulation of unwitting allies. And yet you are bold. Not only did you use the inspector for your own ends, but you also dared to put a count of Cheliox to your service."

"You think much of yourself, foreigner," she said. "But it is true, Takeda's investigation foundered after I allowed him to find the bodies of the first few victims. He worked day and night, returning home only to care

for his motherless children. In his fatigue, he began to fail me."

"How dare you speak of the inspector!" Shiro shouted as he cradled Takeda's head on his knees. The inspector moaned as his man tried to cover his flayed body with his own outer robe.

Kazuko's tentacles twitched, eager to strike. She eyed Shiro.

"What caused you to act in such haste?" said the boss. He laid a hand on Arnisant's head. "Was it simply the impatience of youth? Did you yearn to take your father's place?"

Kazuko scowled, but she took the bait. "My brother learned of my designs, so I visited Yamana this evening. Like the inspector, he is a man who deserves respect. As I apologized for the need to take his life, he tried to bargain with me. He told me of your reputation as an investigator, and I agreed that your arrival might serve to reinvigorate the search for the other tattoos. Before you appeared, I barely had time to disguise myself as a servant."

"And to instruct your men to flay the skin from Yamana's arm. Yet this petty cruelty puzzles me. If you wished me to find the other tattoos, why attempt to mislead me with a false clue?"

"To inspire you!" she said. "Yamana told me of your vanity. He said you had a weakness for spectacle. Do not deny it. I saw your eyes fill with excitement at the sight of the corpse."

She wasn't wrong, I thought. And she reminded me how happy I'd been to see a pretty girl to comfort at the scene of the crime. She'd played the boss, and she'd played me.

"Is it too much to hope that your respect for the honorable Inspector Takeda is sufficient to allow us to remove him to safety?"

Kazuko laughed. "It is far too much."

"Very well," said the boss. He waved his hand in what you might mistake for a helpless gesture. I read it for the signal that it was: *Cut her*.

I'm more of a stabbing fellow, ordinarily. But I can cut a straight line.

Or the rough outline of a phoenix.

It took me three strokes. The first made a clean arc over the bird's raised wings. The wound sagged open, making me think that the magic sealing the stolen skin together hadn't yet bound it to the flesh below. Two more strokes joined the ends of the first cut to a point beneath the phoenix's blazing claws.

The tattoo lit up like molten gold, but only for a second. I grabbed it by the edge and tore it away.

The point of the boss's sword emerged from her back. He'd struck so quickly, she hadn't had time to scream.

Above us, the tentacles swelled and rose toward the ceiling before sinking down again. They withered and fell slack as a snake's shed skin.

The rest of Kazuko's tattoos stretched like living things away from her body. The yeti was the first to break free, its straining muscles bursting like inflamed boils. Once ruptured, the stolen flesh collapsed on the floor, flaccid and unmoving.

All around us, the Kappas resumed their attack, but the sight of their defeated leader drained their courage even as it emboldened the samurai. The rest of the fight was noisy, bloody, and already decided.

The morning light shone bright on the waves, and I could barely make out the sandbar of the Seahorse from across the bay. At least for a while, the Kappas weren't the most feared gang in Oda. The old rivals went back to war less than an hour after the news of Kazuko's death and that of her brother. From the Seahorse all the way up to the eleventh precinct, the constables would be picking up more bodies this morning. But they'd be doing it without Inspector Takeda.

"So he sold his sword to marry a prostitute."

The boss frowned. And I thought I'd used the polite word. "She was a prostitute only on the night he paid for her water-raising ceremony. Purchasing her contract from the Flower and Willow Pavilion cost far more than a public official could afford. Thus, for love, he sold his family sword. When his wife died bearing their second daughter, he was father by day, mother by night. He could no longer afford all of his servants. His appearance suffered. Soon his peers shunned him."

"But all the girls at the whore—I mean, at the flower place," I said. "They all bowed to him. Even Kazuko said she respected him."

"Where a noble finds disgrace, the common man sees honor." The way he said it, I guessed he was quoting something from a book. Either that or he was getting poetical on me again.

I patted Arnisant on the shoulder. You and me, I thought. We're the common men.

We boarded the ship that would take us to mainland Tian Xia. Somewhere in the middle of it all we'd find a country called Quain. If the boss's information was right, the king there had a line on another one of these magic husks. I'd tried talking him out of it, but it was no use. In his mind, it'd be some kind of disgrace to return without the thing the Decemvirate had sent him to find.

Inspector Second Class Uchida Osamu, newly appointed to lead investigations in the eleventh precinct, had wangled not only our passage but also a pretty good reward for our help in the investigation. His report painted our help in such a good light that the city leaders considered



*"Who says tattoos are forever?"*

us honored visitors rather than foreign devils, a phrase I heard every time I walked the streets alone. That was good luck for us, since the body count was sure to grow in the weeks ahead. Osamu and Shiro were going to have their hands full as the gang war heated up.

So it was a surprise when I saw both men ride toward the docks. A third man sat between them, a little stiff in the saddle. I thought it was a good thing they hadn't arrived earlier. Horses don't much fancy me, and I'd hate to see them throw the newly anointed Lord Takeda, Chief Inspector of all of Oda.

At first the phoenix tattoo wouldn't stick to him, even after the boss had blown the pearly dust all over Takeda's weeping wounds. But he wouldn't give up. At last Shiro charged over to behead the dying Kazuko, and the magic took on Takeda's ravaged body. One customer at a time, I guessed.

Takeda and his men raised their hands in salute as our ship left dock. The boss returned the gesture with a Chelish flourish I'd seen him use in fancy company.

Arni just sat at attention, but I lifted his paw to help him wave back. The boss shot me a look like I was embarrassing him, but I didn't care. I wasn't making fun of the samurai, even if they were all above me. I was just helping Arnisant tell them how we both felt, common fellows that we were.

It'd been an honor.