

Questionable Shelter

By Marie Brennan

The snow was getting thicker.

Mitsu wasn't worried for himself—not yet, anyway. But Shahai wasn't as accustomed to hardship as he was, and Daisetsu...

Not those names, he reminded himself. *Kane and Akio*. Simple names, simple clothing, simple hairstyles. Those were the tools with which he had to hide a Unicorn hostage and a missing Hantei prince.

Oddly, it wasn't the first time. He couldn't remember who it was he'd traveled with back in the seventh century, but he'd done something like this once before. Those fragmented memories suggested that Kane and Akio were being a good deal more cooperative than his companion back then.

If anything, they were *too* cooperative. Daisetsu—Akio—had insisted from the start that they avoid samurai as much as possible. His ostensible reason was a desire to see how ordinary people lived, but Mitsu knew there was more to it than that. When necessity forced them into a small town for supplies, he found out why: the Emperor dead, Daisetsu proclaimed heir, Bayushi Shojū his Regent until he came of age.

"Do you mistrust the Regent?" Mitsu tried to ask. But Daisetsu refused to discuss it.

They were just inside the edge of Dragon lands now. Signs of foul weather had forced Mitsu to call an early halt to their travel, while they could still take refuge in an abandoned monastery. He couldn't persuade the presumptive Emperor to abandon his journey and return to Otosan Uchi, but he could at least make sure the boy didn't freeze to death in a snowbank.

Every samurai in Rokugan would condemn me for helping him, he thought. *They would say that his duty transcends any personal desire he may have*. Mitsu even agreed with them. But at the same time... Togashi-ue had chosen Mitsu as his heir in part because of the breadth of experience he'd gained, traveling the Empire. What if Rokugan needed an Emperor with the same knowledge?

He'd paused for long enough that snowflakes were beginning to build up on his shoulders. Mitsu shook himself and returned to gathering wood. If the snow lasted as long as he



feared it might, they would be trapped at the monastery for a full day, maybe two. At least they had enough food, even if Shahai—Kane—had been forced to beg for some of it.

She hadn't even objected to lowering herself like that. The longer those two spent away from the confines of court, the less they bothered to hide their affection for each other; she would do almost anything for her love. Which was another thing Mitsu ought to put a stop to. But Daisetsu's willingness to accept his presence was already tenuous enough that Mitsu didn't want to scare them into running away.

His arms full of firewood, Mitsu directed his steps back toward the monastery. The thickening clouds and descent of the sun meant the woods were growing steadily dimmer—but not so dim that he couldn't see the tracks breaking the glittering blanket of snow.

Mitsu dropped his burden and shucked off the cloak and robe that covered his tattoos. The world sprang into sharp focus, built of more than just hearing and sight. A sizeable group; he picked out five individual scents. Unwashed bodies, carrying a freshly killed deer. Bandits? It was easy for such people to hide in the mountains, with so many abandoned areas. There was no one for them to attack, though, on an out-of-the-way path like this one.

There was *usually* no one for them to attack.

Mitsu knew, even as he began to run, that he was too late. The scents were old enough that if the strangers had been headed for the monastery, they'd already arrived. But he ran anyway, praying to the Fortunes that he hadn't made a fatal mistake.

The breeze brought woodsmoke to his nose, but no human blood. Instead there was... roasting meat? As the monastery came into view, he heard voices, pitched for ordinary conversation. One of them was Daisetsu's.

Giddy with relief, Mitsu slowed. They were still in danger; any encounter not carefully planned for was a risk. But Daisetsu was still alive.

He realized, as he stepped up onto the creaking veranda, that he'd left his cloak and robe behind. Even if he hadn't already betrayed his presence, though, he wouldn't have been willing to go back for them. Not before he got answers.

"I'm coming in," he called out, just in case someone inside was armed and jumpy. Then he slid the door open, forcing the warped wood along its track.

Shahai—Kane—was on her feet, hands clasped to her chest in relief. Behind her, Akio sat with the five strangers Mitsu had scented. They both looked tense, but with wariness rather than outright fear. The strangers had clearly been told about Mitsu, because none of them drew the weapons they bore.

Two *rōnin*, a man and a woman, marked by the *daishō* they wore. The other three appeared to be peasants, and one of them had an unstrung bow propped up at his side. Presumably he'd brought down the deer whose meat was now roasting over the fire. Mitsu's mind reflexively played out the possibilities: he could call on his tiger tattoo, go first for the female *rōnin*—she looked the more hardened of the two—then the male one. By then the archer might have



strung his bow, and the ceiling in here was high enough for him to use it, but Shahai wouldn't sit still while Daisetsu was threatened. He just hoped neither of the other two peasants was actually a rōnin *shugenja*.

Akio stood up. "Minoru-san, I'm glad you're back. These travelers were caught by the storm, like we are, and asked to share our shelter."

"Minoru?" the male rōnin said, not bothering to hide his disbelief. "You're Togashi Mitsu." There were disadvantages to being the most famous *ise zumi* in the Empire.

Mitsu folded one hand over the opposite fist and bowed. "Well spotted. But names serve many purposes, and for now, the name that best serves my purpose is Minoru."

"This is Ichirō-san," Akio said, nodding his head at the speaker. "The other rōnin is Satto-san. And these are Torao-san, Hoshu-san, and Yuki-san."

The last peasant named bowed her face to the floor; like Ichirō, she must know that Mitsu was the Clan Champion's heir. But Ichirō didn't follow suit, and it wasn't hard to guess why—because Mitsu recognized Satto's name.

The strangers were a group of Perfect Land followers.

It didn't have to be a problem. They were in Dragon lands, not Phoenix, and while Mitsu found the Perfect Land Sect troubling, his concerns weren't so serious that they precluded sharing a fire while a snowstorm raged outside. But when one of the people around that fire was the *Emperor*...

They must, at all costs, be prevented from identifying Akio and Kane. Mitsu hoped Shahai had kept her mouth shut; she'd been working on scrubbing away her Unicorn accent, but it still slipped through in moments of stress.

He nodded his head to the Perfect Land followers and said, "Our shelter will be warmer with more to share it. Let us wait out the storm together."

Akio did a good job of downing his meal of venison without gagging. Kane didn't mind, and Mitsu had long since learned that he couldn't always adhere to vegetarian strictures in his travels, but living in the Forbidden City had given Daisetsu no exposure to the "autumn leaves" that formed a significant part of the peasant diet in Dragon lands.

If Mitsu hoped that experience would make Akio shun the newcomers, though, he was profoundly disappointed. Daisetsu had committed himself to experiencing life outside the Imperial Court; they'd had strenuous arguments over Shahai being the one to beg for alms, Mitsu only winning out when he insisted it was a matter of personal safety. With the eight of them trapped inside a crumbling monastery while a snowstorm raged into the new day, into the new day, there was no chance the others would *not* see Akio's face, and if held himself too far apart, it might seem suspicious.

But does he have to question them so eagerly?



Not that the strangers were very forthcoming with their answers. Satto, Mitsu knew, was very highly placed in the sect. Anything that put her on the road must be fairly significant, and the direction of the tracks he'd seen told him they were returning to Dragon lands, not leaving. But where they'd been, and what they'd been doing...

"The Perfect Land? What's that?"

Kane, sitting close by Mitsu's side, jerked as if she wanted to leap up and say something. "Don't," Mitsu whispered, even though he wanted to do the same thing. Of course Daisetsu had never heard of the Perfect Land: who in Otosan Uchi would tell him? Trying to prevent him from hearing, though, would only set off warning bells in the others' minds.

So Mitsu was forced to watch as the juvenile Emperor listened to Ichirō's explanation. Shinsei, the Perfect Land, the kie that was their mantra. The Age of Declining Virtue, and the failings of samurai that were behind the Empire's many woes.



The whole time, Mitsu felt Satto's gaze on him. Waiting to see if he'd object.

Mitsu gritted his teeth. *The storm can't last forever.* Once they were on the road again, he could give Daisetsu more context, all the theological arguments and historical considerations Ichirō was leaving out. Daisetsu had a curious mind; he would appreciate the contrasting information. Someone should have arranged for him to be educated by the Asako—or the Kitsuki.

But it fed all too well into the problems that already drove the boy. Ever since they'd left the Imperial Capital, any time Mitsu or Shahai brought up something related to Bushidō, it sparked a rant from Daisetsu, tearing into the hypocrisy of samurai. The last thing he needed was Satto chiming in, suggesting that the whole edifice of honor was flawed. Then it was Akio's turn to sit in watchful silence as Satto and Ichirō argued, and Yuki crept around them trying to keep the fire going.

They needed more wood; Mitsu had never retrieved the pile he'd dropped. It would be wet by now, but he might be able to find some that was dry—and besides, he would need his robe and cloak again later.

When he excused himself and stepped outside, Kane followed him. "Are you going to do anything?" she demanded in a low voice.

Mitsu gestured for her to move farther down the veranda, away from listening ears. Beyond the roof's edge, the snow fell in a steady, muffling curtain. "It isn't safe to move on."

"I can manage. And with the two of us, we'll keep him safe."

"We can't risk it."



The muscles of her jaw stood out as she clenched her teeth. "Then at least stop him from listening to that poison."

Mitsu shook his head. "That would draw even more attention to him."

"Then draw attention to yourself instead! Do something weird. Recite a koan or—or—whatever it is you people do." Shahai was forgetting herself in her worry; her Unicorn accent was slipping back in.

"It's only for a short while," Mitsu said. "And don't forget, Akio's goal is to reach Khanbulak. We'll have plenty of time to talk to him afterward." For his own part, he was still hoping to persuade Daisetsu to remain in Dragon lands. There were plenty of monasteries—inhabited ones—where he could spend time away from samurai and debate philosophy to his heart's content. If they reached Khanbulak, from there it would be only a small step to leave the Empire. Whatever Daisetsu's path might be, Mitsu couldn't accept that it was to abandon Rokugan entirely.

"You should get back inside," he said. "I don't want them wondering what we're talking about. And we shouldn't leave him alone in there." They'd already recognized Mitsu. So far he'd heard no rumors that he'd absconded with the Imperial Heir and a Unicorn hostage...but the moment someone suggested that, it would be trivially easy for them to figure out where Daisetsu had gone. *The last time I did this, I don't think I was quite so recognizable.*

The reminder that they'd left Akio alone got Kane moving. Mitsu awakened his wolf tattoo and set off to find his buried clothing and some firewood—but inwardly, he wished Togashi Gaijutsu had inked him with something that could get them out of this trap.

Mitsu remembered being Daisetsu's age, more than once. In almost all of those lifetimes, he'd spent those years at the High House of Light, but for some of them he'd been training elsewhere as a bushi or a courtier, or living as a peasant, not yet realizing his path would lead him back to the monastery.

He remembered very well the excitement of feeling a new world opening up before him, full of thoughts his mind had—so far as he knew at the time—never thought before. It went with being young.

He wished now that Daisetsu were a few years older, or younger. Anything to take him out of that age where a new idea could light his soul on fire.

The storm was subsiding at last, but too late. Mitsu was scooping snow into a bucket to melt for water when Akio and Kane came up to him. Kane's posture told him there was a problem even before Akio opened his mouth.

"I've changed my mind," Akio said.

"Oh?" Mitsu said, apprehension tightening his gut.



"With the snows starting this early, there's no way we'll be able to reach Khanbulak any time soon. It would be dangerous to even try. But that's all right, because Ichirō-san has offered us shelter for the winter, with his people."

"We *can't*," Kane snapped, in a tight voice that didn't go beyond the three of them. "They're heretics, Da—Akio. And it may sound romantic to you, spending the winter in a peasant village, but I promise you'll think otherwise after the first month."

The glare he shot her was the angriest Mitsu had ever seen him direct at his Unicorn love. "Don't tell me what I will and will not think. I said I wanted to experience something different, and I meant it. I refuse to be a hypocrite like all the rest of them. If you don't want to stay with me, that's fine; go back to your family. I'm sure *Minoru-san* can get you there."

As if Mitsu had any intention of leaving Daisetsu alone among the Perfect Land Sect. "Akio-san, there are things you don't know about them. If any of them recognize you, they might not hesitate to use you for political leverage. If they *have* recognized you, then this offer might be the first step in making that happen."

"They haven't. I'm sure of it. Who would believe it, anyway?"

Mitsu wasn't nearly so sanguine. But Shahai had gone snow-pale at the suggestion that she abandon Daisetsu and return to her family; he knew she wouldn't argue more. Not today, anyway. And for all Daisetsu's insistence that he wanted to leave behind his rank and his upbringing and experience life as a different person, he didn't hesitate to shout Mitsu down when the two of them disagreed.

Which meant they were both going with Ichirō. Unless Mitsu subdued them both, right now, and dragged them off through the snow. Then hoped none of the Perfect Land people tried to follow them.

"Let's go talk to them," he said.

Back in the monastery, Ichirō and Satto were waiting. "It's very generous of you to offer shelter for the winter," Mitsu said. "Especially in these hard times. Are you sure the three of us won't be a burden to you?"

As he expected, Satto twitched. "The *three* of you? But—you're the Clan Champion's heir."

He bowed to her. "As I said when we met, for the moment, I am Minoru. And I believe the snowfall that brought us together here is the work of karma. I would be honored to accept your hospitality...should you be so kind as to offer it."



“Of course,” Ichirō said. “We can’t offer much, but—”

“Ichirō-san!”

It seemed there was dissension in the other side’s ranks, too. But interestingly, Ichirō must hold at least as much clout as Satto, because she didn’t overrule him. Instead the two of them glared at each other, holding a silent argument, until Satto said grudgingly, “The food will be very plain. And not much of it.”

“I do not mind hardship,” Mitsu said.

“Neither do I,” Akio echoed.

You will, Mitsu thought. For all Daisetsu’s fiery ideals, he was wholly unprepared for what he was getting into.

Mitsu could only hope that would sharpen the boy’s mind, instead of dulling it. He himself would need every scrap of intelligence and quick thinking he could bring to bear if he was to prevent the Crown Prince from casting aside the future of the Emerald Empire.

